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Jewish Attitudes about Nature

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Ordination

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Digest

This thesis explores the Jewish attitude toward nature during pre-biblical, biblical, rabbinic and modern times. We begin in the time when "the People of the Book" had not yet received the Torah or written commentaries and so could not reach God through text or Torah. Instead, our forebears sought out high places and climbed to the top of mountain peaks, which they believed brought them closer to heaven, the home of God. The ancients had an intimate relationship with nature because through nature they learned about and communicated with God.

When writing was discovered and literacy spread, the role of nature in Judaism became more defined. Torah replaced nature as the path to learn about God and fixed liturgy became the primary modality for communication with God. Yet nature remained a vital force in Biblical Judaism because nature served God as medium for divine reward and retribution and as a medium for theophany.

In the rabbinic period codes of law were developed and our relationship with nature was addressed in this new fashion. These ancient texts show great insight into the ramifications of environmental misuse and the unity of all of creation. We learn, however, that the purpose of the Jewish halakhah concerning nature is not ecological. Rather we are commanded to act responsibly and respectfully in terms of the environment because the earth belongs to God.

Finally we explore the work of two modern scholars, Abraham Joshua Heschel and Martin Buber. Heschel and Buber teach us to meet the world with wonder and awe, and to experience the connection between all of God's creation in order to understand and experience God.

By exploring our forebears' perspectives on nature, we can learn how our relationship with nature can connect us to the world, to others, and to God.

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> The Lord God formed man from the dust of the earth. He breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul.[1]

The act of creation, in which man *(Adam)* is formed from the dust of the earth *(adamah)*, forever linked humanity and nature by the inseverable bond of common origin. For all time, humanity and nature stand as siblings before their common creator, *Adonai*.

The connection between Israel and nature was reinforced generations later when God redeemed the Israelites from bondage and brought them into the wilderness to shed the skin of slavery. In the wilderness our ancestors learned patience from the red desert rock, which is ever so slowly sculpted by the desert wind and rain, and tenacity from the *rotem* plant which carefully conserves its water and then bursts forth with joyous white blossoms.[2] The Israelites thus began the process of cleansing and healing from years of enslavement by living in intimate contact with nature as they wandered in the wilderness.

Revelation, the seminal event in Jewish history, occurred deep in the wilderness, in the mountains, and further intertwined the Jewish people with nature.

> On the third new moon after the Israelites had gone forth from the land of Egypt...they entered the wilderness of Sinai....and

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[1]Gen. 2:7.

[2]The *rotem* or white broom plant is a common desert plant. According to Rabbi Meir, Hagar sets Ishmael under a *rotem* bush in Genesis 21:14-15. (Bereshit Raba 53:13.)

> camped in the wilderness...in front of the mountain and Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him out of the mountain.[3]

The time had come for the Israelites to meet their God, and once again the power of the Deity was revealed through natural forces. God was veiled in thunder, lightening, fire and the quaking of the ground, indistinguishable from the forces of nature, yet clearly not of nature.

One might suppose that, based on the integral part nature played in Creation, Redemption and Revelation, Judaism would forever foster a close connection with the natural world. However, that is not the case. Jewish attitudes about nature have varied greatly throughout time and have ranged from animosity to reverence that resembles pantheism.

Two extremes are represented by Abraham ben Maimonides and Steven Schwarzschild. Maimonides taught that accessing wilderness was essential for one's spiritual development because it helps us "to know before whom we stand." He wrote:

> In order to serve God, one needs access to the enjoyment of the beauties of nature, such as the contemplation of flower-decorated meadows, majestic mountains, flowing rivers....For all these are essential to the spiritual development of even the holiest of people.[4]

In contrast, Steven Schwarzschild, the renowned Jewish philosopher, felt nature had no place in the relationship between humanity and God, other than to serve as a tool with which humanity can fulfill the *mitzvah* of having dominion over the earth. He explained:

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[3] Exod. 19:1-3.

> My dislike of nature goes deep: non-human nature, mountain ranges, wilderness, tundra, even beautiful but unsettled landscapes strike me as opponents, which, as the Bible commands (Gen. 1:28-30), I am to fill and conquer.[5]

Schwarzschild then asks: "Might it be that Judaism and nature are at odds?"[6]

We find a similar conflict in the Mishnah. In Abot 3:7 we read that if a man interrupts his study to praise a tree, "Scripture reckons it to him as if he had forfeited his life." But in Berahot 43b and 58b the rabbis tell us we are commanded to praise God for the beauty of nature.[7]

This dynamic tension influencing the Jewish relationship with the environment has continued throughout Jewish history. Our need for progress and development, to "fill and master" the earth, is tempered by our need to protect God's creation, "to till and to tend."[8]

In the following chapters, we will explore this dynamic tension as reflected in the changing Jewish attitudes toward nature during pre-biblical, biblical, rabbinic and modern times. Not surprisingly, Jewish attitudes about nature have varied dramatically over the centuries, but nonetheless, we can find some common threads throughout Jewish tradition.

We will go back in history to the time when "the People of the Book" had not yet received the Torah or written commentaries and so could not reach God through text or Torah. Instead, our forebears sought out high places and

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[4] David E. Stein, *A Garden of Choice Fruit*, p. 68.

[5] Steven Schwarzschild, "The Unnatural Jew," p. 88.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Jakob J. Petuchowski, "The Rabbi and the Tree."

climbed to the top of mountain peaks, which they believed, brought them closer to heaven, the home of God. The ancients had an intimate relationship with nature because through nature they learned about and communicated with God.

When writing was discovered and literacy spread the role of nature in Judaism became more defined. Torah replaced nature as the path to learn about God and fixed liturgy became the primary modality for communication with God. Yet nature remained a vital force in Biblical Judaism because nature served God as medium for divine reward and retribution and as a medium for theophany.

In the rabbinic period codes of law were developed and our relationship with nature was addressed in this new fashion. The influence of this milieu is apparent today in the scores of books, articles and organizations that have focused on rabbinic ecological laws. These ancient texts show great insight into the ramifications of environmental misuse and the unity of all of creation. We learn, however, that the purpose of the Jewish halakhah concerning nature is not ecological. Rather we are commanded to act responsibly and respectfully in terms of the environment because the earth belongs to God.

Finally we explore the work of two modern scholars, Abraham Joshua Heschel and Martin Buber, in order to understand the modern perspective on the relationship between Judaism and nature. We will have already come to

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[8]Gen. 2:15; Gen. 1:28.

understand that theology and ecology are intertwined, and Heschel and Buber teach us to meet the world with wonder and awe, and to experience the unity of all creation before God. Through these experiences with the natural world, we are able to experience our Creator.

Jewish attitudes about nature have changed drastically through the ages. Many of the views held by our forebears are difficult for us to understand, because they are no longer relevant in our time. However, many of the ancient traditions are still laden with meaning and can help enrich our lives as Jews. Most importantly, by exploring our forebears' perspectives on nature, we can learn how our relationship with nature can connect us to the world, to others, and to God.

Chapter One
Pre-Biblical Attitudes about Nature

Introduction:

> And Abram[1] passed through the land to the place of Shechem, to the terebinth[2] of Moreh. And the Canaanite was then in the land. And the Lord appeared to Abram, and said, To your seed will I give this land; and there he built an altar to the Lord, who appeared to him. And he moved from there to a mountain in the east of Beth-El, and pitched his tent, having Beth-El on the west, and Hai on the east; and there he built an altar to the Lord, and called upon the name of the Lord.[3]

Abraham, eager to thank his Creator, sought out the majesty of a tree, with the trunk reaching toward heaven. There he built an altar to the Lord. Again wishing to speak with his God, Abraham climbed a mountain. At the high place he built an altar and called out to his Maker.

Rather than study Torah to understand the ways of God or read the written words of a prayerbook to communicate with God, Abraham goes directly to nature. Torah and tefilah, the two elements of study and prayer that modern Jews often consider the mainstay of our religious practice, were not parts of the world of the first Jews. Abraham looked to the natural world around him to understand God and God's ways. He climbed to the high places to worship in order to communicate with God.

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1 Abram is Abraham. God changes his name in Genesis 17: 5 -- "Neither shall your name any more be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made you."

2 A tree in the sumac family. Trees were considered desirable places for worship because of their height. See Chapter Two for a more complete explanation of the connection between mountains and trees as "high places."

3 Gen. 12:6-8.

In Abraham's time, worship in high places reinforced the intimate relationship between people, nature and God. In this chapter, we will look at how the destruction of the high places altered Judaism's attitude towards nature, and its ways of worship.[4] First we will attempt to understand the characteristics of worship in high places and what the positive and negative aspects of this type of worship might have been. Next we will examine how two major events, the discovery of the Book of Deuteronomy and literacy, resulted in the elimination of worship in high places. These changes parallel Judaism's evolution from an experiential, nature-based faith in which high places played a central role, to an abstract, text-based religion which focused around the Temple and the Torah. We will discuss the ramifications of these revolutionary changes and how they still influence our religious practice and our belief today.

The People of the Book without Books?

The written word appears not to have been used by the Jews until the time of Moses.[5] There is no mention of writing in Genesis, even at events where one would expect writing in a literate culture. For example, in

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[4]For the sake of continuity, I will define Judaism as the religious practice that began with Abraham and continues today.

[5]The first time we read about written text is Exodus 17:14: "And the Lord said to Moses, Write this for a memorial in a book." Writing then appears in various forms:
-Metaphors for writing and books: Exod. 17:14 and Exod. 32:32.
-Signet engravings: Exod. 28:31,36.
-Written names: Num. 17:2-3.
-Recorded events: Num. 33:2.
-Written bill of divorce: Deut. 24:1,3.
-Written song in Deut. 31:19,22.

Genesis 23 when Abraham purchases a burial site for Sarah from Ephron the Hittite, there is no mention of a deed of purchase. The text reads: "Abraham accepted Ephron's terms. Abraham paid out to Ephron the money that he had named in the hearing of the Hittites."[6] An exchange of money and the presence of witnesses confirm the sale.

We find another example in Genesis 31:48, when Jacob and Laban make a pact. Instead of a written document, the Torah records that they built a mound of rocks to symbolize their covenant: "And Laban declared, 'This mound is a witness between you and me this day.'"[7]

Accompanying the lack of written word is the apparent lack of a system of codified law. There are some basic laws, but a real system of codes was not established until the time of Moses.

Many modern Jews consider the reading of the Torah, the recitation of liturgy, and the study of Talmud, Midrash, Codes and Commentaries -- all of which are written texts -- to be the core of our religion. We use these texts to learn about God, our world, ourselves and to communicate with God. How did our ancestors meet these needs without written texts? In the pages that follow we demonstrate that our ancestors looked to nature to learn about God, their world, themselves and to communicate with their God.

-Public reading of the Law: Exod. 24:7, Deut. 3:10-11, Josh. 8:44.

[6]Gen. 24:7.

[7]Gen. 31:47.

Worship in High Places - an Accepted Practice:

Before the building of Solomon's Temple in 1000 B.C.E., Jews worshiped primarily in "high places."[8] In Chapter Two we will discuss that because the realm of the Deity was believed to be in the heavens, mortals sought out high places such as mountains and trees where they believed the heavenly realm of God and the earthly realm of humans intersected. In Chapter Two we will also discuss that theophany occurred almost exclusively in natural settings, primarily the high places associated with streams, trees and mountains, until the building of the Ark and the Tent of Meeting.[9]

We know from Exodus that initially God did not limit the places where the Israelites could worship. God taught the Israelites about the potential sanctity of all places:

> And the Lord said to Moses, Thus you shall say to the people of Israel....An altar of earth you shall make to me, and shall sacrifice on it your burnt offerings, and your peace offerings, your sheep, and your oxen; *in all places* where I cause my name to be pronounced I will come to you, and I will bless you.[10]

As we will discuss in Chapter Two, our ancestors often chose high places to communicate with the Creator. Some high places were formal, with shrines, altars, and priests designated to officiate at sacrifices. Others doubled as watchtowers within cities or towns. With their dual purpose of worship

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[8]I am using worship as a generic term for communicating with the Deity. It may imply prayer or sacrifice as is appropriate to that time.

[9]Mt. Sinai, Mt. Carmel, Mt. Zion are primary examples of high places where theophany occurred.

[10]Italics mine, Exod. 20: 19,21.

and security, these became centers of town life.[12] Other high places were less formal -- a remote hill to which a family might go to communicate privately with God.[13]

Common people and kings sought out high places to worship. Solomon worshiped on high before he completed the Temple and God spoke to him there as He did at the high place inside the city of Gibeon:

> Only the people sacrificed in high places, because there was no house built to the name of the Lord, until those days. And Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of David his father; only he sacrificed and burned incense in high places. And the king went to Gibeon to sacrifice there; for that was the great high place; a thousand burnt offerings Solomon offered upon that altar. In Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night; and God said, Ask what I shall give you.[14]

From the apologetic tone, we can appreciate that the writer was not comfortable with worship in the high places, although it was the norm of the period to sacrifice there, and for God to appear, as God did to Solomon in Gibeon.

We can see further evidence of the acceptance of worship in high places in the Book of Kings. Although clearly the writer is opposed to high places, the minhag of the time does not appear to be disturbed by it nor are there negative consequences associated with worship in high places:

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[11] Italics mine, Exod. 20: 19,21.

[12] *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, p. 199. Also see 2 Kings 17:9,29 23:8; 2 Chron. 14:4, 2 1:3,13; 1 Chron. 16:39; 21:29.

[13] *Encyclopedia Judaica*, p. 1167.

[14] 1 Kings 3:2-5.

> And Jehoash did that which was right in the sight of the Lord all his days because Jehoiada the priest instructed him. But the high places were not taken away; the people still sacrificed and burned incense in the high places.[15]

We also know that despite the continuation of what later came to be considered pagan practices, Jews also were worshiping YHVH at their shrines. In 2 Chronicles, worshiping at a high place is acceptable if the Jewish God is being worshiped. Manessah's sin was that he worshiped foreign gods. The people were permitted to worship on high places as long as they worshiped to the Lord God of Israel:

> Manasseh....did that which was displeasing to the Lord....For he rebuilt the high places...and he erected altars for the Baalim, and made Asherot, and worshiped all the host of heaven, and served them. Then Manasseh....took away the foreign gods, and the idols from the house of the Lord....and commanded Judah to serve the Lord God of Israel. To be sure, the people did sacrifice still in the high places, but only to the Lord their God.[16]

The Ritual Practice of the High Places:

There is a severe paucity of information describing Jewish practice in high places. This is because as the scholar Patrick H. Vaughan writes, "Since the Old Testament (especially in the Deuteronomic writings) was more concerned to decry than to describe *bamot*,[17] the evidence for the cult associated with them is all too slight."[18] Ironically, the only record we have of what Judaism looked like before the Torah became the focus of Jewish practice is the Torah

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[15] 2 Kings 12:3-4.

[16] 2 Chron. 33:1-3, 17.

[17] Hebrew for high places.

[18] Patrick H. Vaughan *The Meaning of Bama in the Old Testament*, p. 31.

itself. The act of writing down the history and the laws of a religion drastically changed the religion itself, leaving no written record of the past, and thus making it impossible to know for certain what preceded it.[19] Nonetheless, by using the text as a springboard and relying on what we know of coeval religions, we can piece together what the religious practices of our ancestors might have been.

Before the Torah was revealed to humanity, people learned about God through observation. They lived close to nature and observed the cycles of seasons and storms in order to better understand the Creator. Not only did they meet God in the high places through sacrifice and theophany, but also they learned about God through nature: storms, drought, sunrise and gentle rain all were believed to reveal the workings of the Deity. God was not believed to be nature, but rather nature was considered the most visible presence of God.[20]

High Place Worship and the Right Side of the Brain:

Leonard Shlain, a brain surgeon and scholar of religion, views literacy as the main event that turned Judaism away from nature by enabling Torah study to replace experiential worship in natural settings. He contrasts Judaism before and after Torah became the focal point of the religion. Shlain contends that before Judaism became a text-based religion, when Jews learned about

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[19]This will be discussed in detail later in this chapter.

[20]For example recall Deut. 11:13-17, Dan. 6:21-23, Ezek. 36:6-11. See also 1 Sam. 7:10, Ps. 77:19, Isa. 29:6 and Exod. 3:4.

God through observing the natural world, religious experiences were concentrated in the right hemisphere of the brain. The right side of the brain is associated with images, emotions, music, faith, intuition and creativity. Often called the "female" side of the brain,[21] the right side enables us to integrate feelings, understand non-verbal messages such as body language, emotions far beyond what can be said in words, and simultaneously process various inputs. The right side, for example, feels the awe of a sunrise over the ocean.

The left side of the brain became dominant once we became a text-based religion. The left side is associated with speech, logic, linear progression (i.e. time), and numbers. The left side of the brain enables us to think logically and abstractly and therefore to develop concepts of linear time, justice and morality.[22]

According to Shlain's theory, before Jews looked to the text to understand God and God's world, Jewish worship primarily involved right-brain activities. Shlain's arguments are supported by what we know about worship before the Torah was written down. Religious practice was a holistic experience incorporating smell (incense), sound (instruments), sight (views of nature), movement (dance) and speech (song). For example, in Exodus we

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[21]Men and women both use right and left side functions of the brain. However, women have between 10 percent and 33 percent more fibers connecting the two sides than men do.(Robert Logan, *The Alphabet Effect*, p.24). This enables women to be aware of and express the activities of the right side of the brain, while men are more able to dissociate from the right brain activity. Leonard Shlain, *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess*, p. 23.

[22]For a more thorough explanation see Shlain, *The Alphabet*, pp. 17-27.

read about Miriam leading the people in song and dance as they thank God for rescuing them from the Egyptians:

> Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines, dancing. Miriam answered them, Sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider has He thrown into the sea.[23]

In Psalms we see that music and dance were an integral part of worship:

> Let them praise His name in the dance; let them sing praises to Him with the tambourine and lyre. Praise Him with the timbrel and dance! Praise Him with lute and the pipe! Praise Him with resounding cymbals! Praise Him with loud clashing cymbals![24]

According to Shlain worship which included musical instruments involves the right side of the brain, which is able to hear 50 instruments at once and integrate it into one sound. Experiences in nature also are generally associated with the right side of the brain. The right side of the brain can use images instead of words to interpret the world and is able to process many inputs simultaneously. When receiving input from the natural world, we use the right side because we must integrate a plethora of sensory data. For example, to assess the weather conditions outside one might integrate the movement of a branch in the wind, the warmth of the sun on one's back, the smell of freshly moistened soil and the view of clouds swirling overhead. When we articulate what we experience in nature, however, we utilize the left side of the brain. We then create a balance between left and right-brain activity.

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[23] Exod. 15:20-21.

[24] Ps. 149: 3-5.

When we look to nature to understand God's ways, we do not discover logical answers (left-brain) but rather mystical or emotional answers (right-brain). This is why in times of distress, people often seek out solace in a favorite spot in nature. When they do so, it is not so much to understand why what happened did so, but rather to be soothed emotionally.

Nature's Answer to Theodicy:

Nature provides us with a very different answer to theodicy than the Torah. Dr. Steven Geller of the Jewish Theological Seminary addresses this difference in his paper, "Nature's Answer: Wisdom, Creation and Piety in Late Biblical Religions." Geller juxtaposes what he terms Old Wisdom (looking to Nature for answers of God's ways) with that of Torah Piety (looking to the Torah for all the answers). He believes that Torah Piety began to replace the Old Wisdom in 7th century B.C.E. and that the transition was complete by the 5th century B.C.E.[25] Not coincidentally, these are the years in which literacy spread through ancient Israel according to Chaim Potok and other scholars.[26]

Geller demonstrates that the Book of Job and several Psalms represent the reluctance of the authors of those texts to surrender the ways of the Old Wisdom. The story of the Book of Job is well known. Job suffers unbearable punishment for no obvious reason. The theme, what is the cause of evil and

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[25] Steven Geller: "Nature's Answer: Wisdom, Creation and Piety in Late Biblical Religions," p. 7.

[26] Chaim Potok, *Wanderings*, p.141; Robert K. Logan, *The Alphabet Effect*, p. 81.

suffering, has universal appeal. The explanations available for Job's suffering are limited. The idea of an afterlife has not yet found full acceptance so he cannot believe that all will be rectified in the world to come. Since monolatry has replaced monotheism, he cannot blame his pain on another god whose powers are stronger than YHVH's.[27] What explanations remain?

In the book of Job Job's friend Eliphaz the Temanite presents the Torah Piety view that bad things happen to people who have angered God and therefore deserve to be punished. He and his friends beg Job to dig deep into his own conscience and determine what he has done to cause this misfortune. Eliphaz "reminds" Job that a truly righteous man never suffers:

> Remember, I beg you, who ever perished, being blameless? Or where were the righteous cut off? As I have seen, those who plow iniquity, and sow wickedness, reap the same. By the blast of God they perish, and by the blast of His anger are they consumed. [28]

But Job does not accept this as true. Job is representative of the Old Wisdom, based on nature. Any person who has experienced nature knows that blameless men often suffer. Eliphaz's argument, representing Torah piety, is repeated in Psalm 37:25: "I have been young and am now old, but I have never seen a righteous man abandoned, or his children seeking bread."[29] This explanation shows the inadequacy of the written tradition to explain theodicy. His friends attempt to deny that Job did not sin because if Job is righteous their moral order is disrupted. Ultimately, God sides with Job and

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[27] In 2 Kings 3 monolatry provides the explanation for the Israelites defeat at the hands of the Moabites: the Moabites' god was stronger than the Israelites' God.

[28] Job 4:7-9.

chastises Job's friends for their advice to Job: "the Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite, 'I am incensed at you and your two friends, for you have not spoken the truth about Me as did My servant Job.'"[29] Geller views this as the author's further rejection of Torah Piety's answer to theodicy.[30]

Old Wisdom offered a different explanation for theodicy. God explained to Job why he suffered by showing Job various aspects of nature. God never directly answers Job's accusation that his suffering is unjust. Instead God overwhelms Job with images of dewdrops and frost, of lion and ostrich. By surrounding Job with images of nature, God brings Job into a state of awe and amazement at the intricacy and beauty of the world.[31] The emotion this experience invokes is intended to lift Job up from his pain. Old Wisdom therefore did not provide an intellectual answer to theodicy. Instead, grounded in nature, Old Wisdom created transformative experiences facilitating the profound emotional responses of awe and ecstasy. In this way, Old Wisdom diminished the need for an intellectual explanation.

Psalm 8 offers another example of the contrast of Old Wisdom to new Torah Piety:

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[28]Ps. 37:25.

[29] Job 42: 7.

[30]Geller, "Nature's Answer," p. 2.

[31]Job is overwhelmed by the presence of God. However, if God's presence was sufficient to calm Job why does God not appear and leave immediately? Since nothing is redundant in Scripture there must be an explanation for the extended speech from the whirlwind. Why does God speak in poetic language and why does he show Job nature? He could have shown Job classification tables describing the world order or spoken about the skills that He has enabled

When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers,
the moon and stars that You set in place.
What is man that You have been mindful of him?[33]

Line 4 begins with "when" but there is no second half of that clause. When he looked to the heavens, what happened? According to Geller's argument, the poet is so overwhelmed with awe of the sublime that his own concerns are no longer important to him. Rather than creating a logical consequence, he is overwhelmed by emotion. He does not have the logical intellectual answers that Torah Piety will try to provide, but he does have the consolation with which the wordless enormity of the heavens embraces him. Geller explains, "Psalm 8 makes explicit what is only implicit in the divine speeches of Job...a sense of awe at nature, which does not intellectually answer the problem of evil and suffering, but makes them irrelevant in terms of a swelling emotion."[34]

Other Positive and Negative Aspects of Worship on High:

Aside from offering a response to theodicy, there were many other positive aspects to nature-based worship. High places were accessible to all, regardless of geography, social status, gender, or wealth. God was accessible to everyone; wherever they called His name. Worship on the high places with its song, dance, and incense, offered an experiential holistic experience.

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man to develop. We must look beyond the presence of God to the way in which He presents Himself to explain the use of poetry and nature.

[33]Ps. 8:4.

[34]Geller, "Nature's Answer," p. 18.

According to educator Maria Montessori the more senses one uses in an experience the more deeply one integrates that experience.[35] Additionally, since faith is experienced in the right hemisphere of the brain, experiential religion probably resulted in higher levels of faith. As Shlain writes:

> The right brain's feeling states are authentic. Once a person has experienced love or ecstasy he or she knows it. An internal voice verifies the experience beyond debate. Feeling states allow us to have faith in God. [36]

Worship in high places was also problematic. High place worship consisted of many local shrines with no central governing body controlling or monitoring their rituals. The religious expression practiced on high places often resembled pagan practice and sometimes the two melded together. In 2 Kings we read about worship in high places drifting into pagan practice:

> The people of Israel did secretly those things that were not right against the Lord their God, and they built for themselves high places in all their cities, from the watchtower to the fortified city. And they set up for themselves pillars and Asherim in every high hill, and under every green tree; And there they burned incense in all the high places, as did the nations whom the Lord carried away before them; and did wicked things to provoke the Lord to anger; For they served idols, about which the Lord had said to them, you shall not do this thing.[37]

Another example is found in 1 Kings:

> And Judah did evil in the sight of the Lord....For they also built them high places, and images, and Asherim on every high hill, and under every green tree. And there were also cult prostitutes in the land; and they did according to all the abominations of the nations, which the Lord cast out before the people of Israel.[38]

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[35]Conversation with Montessori Educator Robyn Breiman, 10 November 1998.

[36]Shlain, *The Alphabet,* p. 19.

[37]2 Kings 17:9-12.

[38] 1 Kings 14:22-24.

Additionally, worshiping God through nature-based experiences tended to emphasize the power of creation and fertility, and therefore of women. Conversely, the Torah emphasized male domination and the subservience of women. Thus it became necessary to move the Jews away from experiencing the natural phenomena of the power of the female and to sever the association between women, birth, fertility and power in order to centralize all that power in Elohim, as the sole provider who gives and sustains all life.

Nature and High Places Are a Threat:

Even in the early stories in the Torah we see the stripping of power away from nature. The story of the serpent offers an example. We read in Genesis 3:1 "Now the serpent was craftier than all the beasts in the field which the Lord God had made." One would expect the first relationship between man and animal would be one of cooperation, or fear, or perhaps playfulness. An animal could teach man to collect berries, or might frighten him, or perhaps might be used as food. Instead, the first relationship the Torah describes between man and animal is one of deceit and manipulation. The serpent beguiles the woman, encouraging her to sin against God by eating the apple. What is the purpose of this narrative and why was the snake chosen to be the catalyst for this sin?

Ancient cultures such as the Egyptians affirmed the power of women's fertility and glorified nature's ability to create life. The snake, with its graceful wave-like motions, was associated with women's sexuality and thus with life.

As one scholar writes, "snakes resembled three...important life-affirming images: the meander of rivers, the roots of trees and plants, and the umbilical cord of mammals."[39]

The snake was revered as a representation of the power of rebirth, seen in the shedding of its skin. Because it lived in crevices in the earth and slithered on its belly, the snake was considered to be the closest creature to mother earth, sustainer of life. For the Egyptians the snake represented nature's ability to create life. They used the same hieroglyph to represent both snake and goddess.

The third chapter of Genesis brings down the snake, changing its exalted role as giver of life and claims this power exclusively for Elohim. Nature, in the metaphor of snake, is stripped of its power and cursed. Even the snake's crawling on the ground is no longer viewed as positive:

> And the Lord God said to the serpent, Because you have done this, you are cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; *upon your belly shall you go,* and dust shall you eat all the days of your life.[40]

Additionally, the link between women and the snake, both givers of life, is severed:

> And I will put enmity between you [the snake] and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; it shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his [man's] heel. [41]

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[39]Shlain, *The Alphabet*, p. 54.

[40]Italics mine, Gen. 3:14.

[41]Gen. 3:15.

Women, who in other cultures of this period also were associated with the power of nature as givers of life, are dethroned here as well. From the very beginning of the Torah, nature and its associate women are subordinated to males by Elohim.[41]

> To the woman he said, I will greatly multiply the pain of your childbearing; in sorrow you shall bring forth children; and your desire shall be to your husband, and he shall rule over you.[42]

Women's ability to give birth is thus re-framed into a negative and painful curse.

Man's relationship with the land also changes and becomes adversarial:

> And to Adam he said...cursed is the ground for your sake; in sorrow shall you eat of it all the days of your life. Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to you; and you shall eat the herb of the field.[43]

Why these curses against nature and natural phenomena? Although we cannot know for certain, it is likely that early Jews held views similar to the Egyptians that associated the power of life with nature and women, represented in the symbol of the snake. Prior to the writing of the Torah, people learned about the world and God primarily from observation and experience, transmitting their wisdom through the oral tradition, from generation to generation. The early Jews associated life, woman and nature.

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[41]It is interesting to note the following: 1) The snake did tell the truth, the man and woman did not die immediately upon eating the fruit. 2) Cain, whose sin is murder, is punished far more leniently than Eve.

[42]Gen. 3:16.

[43]Gen. 3:17-18.

We see evidence of this lingering association between the snake and the ability to give life in Numbers.

> And the Lord said to Moses, Make a venomous serpent, and set it upon a pole. And it shall come to pass, that everyone who is bitten, when he looks upon it, shall live. And Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he looked at the serpent of bronze, he lived.[45]

Later, this serpent is destroyed: "He removed the high places, and broke the images, and cut down the Ashera, and broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for in those days the people of Israel burned incense to it; and he called it Nehushtan."[46]

Although western culture now has for centuries despised the snake, the extent of its power long ago is evident in the survival of its association with life-giving power. Even today, the symbol of the medical profession, the caduceus, is two serpents twined about a staff, an indication of its exalted position.

Chapter Three in Genesis, a polemic against the power of women and nature (represented by the snake), only would be necessary if people's belief in the power of women and nature threaten their acceptance of Elohim. In the attempt to move people to a belief in an omnipotent abstract God, nature had to be dethroned.

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[45]Num. 21:8-9.

[46]2 Kings 18:4.

Literacy Aids in the Destruction of the High Places:

We really do not really know why the concept of the holiness of high places was destroyed. We can speculate that it was either an attempt to eradicate paganism, a defensive maneuver motivated by the fall of the Northern Kingdom or an economic and political move to consolidate power in Jerusalem.[47]

Many rulers attempted to destroy all the high places but none had the authority that the Book of Deuteronomy provided when it was "discovered" in 622 B.C.E. Here for the first time we read that God demands that all worship be centralized in one spot, which is to be in Jerusalem:

> Do not worship the Lord your God in like manner,[48] but look only to the site that the Lord your God will choose amidst all your tribes as His habitation, to establish His name there. There you are to go, and there you are to bring your burnt offerings and other sacrifices, your tithes and contributions, your votive and freewill offerings, and the firstlings of your herds and flocks. [49]

Since most of the people lived outside of Jerusalem and were unable to travel to Jerusalem more than a few times a year, the prohibition against local shrines meant that for most of the year they could not participate in the sacrificial cult. This was another reason why the focus of the religion changed to text. As Chaim Potok writes:

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[47] For a complete study see *A History of the Jewish People* Edited by H.H. Ben-Sasson, or *Encyclopedia Judaic*, p. 1165.

[48] From verse 2 we learn that "the manner" means "lofty mountains and on hills or under any luxuriant tree." Deut. 12: 2.

[49] Deut. 12:4-6.

> The cult was centralized in Jerusalem. Israelites could no longer offer sacrifices to YHVH outside the temple...Since most of the tribe of Judah lived outside Jerusalem, this reform made possible the ultimate allegiance to a mode of worship whose focus was a book, the covenant, and a liturgy devoid of the act of sacrifice.[50]

This major change in the religion only became possible because of the increased rate of literacy that had swept the nation. Under Assyrian domination, the Jews reached a zenith in terms of literacy rates. Although literacy remained uncommon in surrounding environs, in ancient Israel even lay people were literate. Thus a text-based religion was able to emerge.[51]

This shift had major consequences on how the ancient Israelites perceived their world. According to Robert Logan, author of The Alphabet Effect, the way in which one learns about the world is as important as what one learns:

> A medium of communication is not merely a passive conduit for the transmission of information but rather an active force in creating new social patterns and new perceptual realities. A person who is literate has a different worldview than one who receives information exclusively through oral communication. The alphabet, independent of the spoken languages it transcribes or the information it makes available, has its own intrinsic impacts.[52]

What were those impacts? The left side of the brain is used to read and process text. A linear, text-based religion emphasizes left-brain activity and fosters the development of left-brain skills. The development of the rational,

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[50]Chaim Potok, *Wanderings,* p. 140.

[51]Ibid., 141.

[52]Logan, The *Alphabet Effect,* pp. 24-25.

logical, sequential left-brain deeply affected and enriched Judaism, and henceforth the world.

The left-brain's ability to understand the world in terms of linear progression led the way to an understanding of an end of time and to the development of the concept of Messiah. Its emphasis on counting and mathematics liberated man from determining the calendar by observation of lunar cycles and allowed to him to determine time by pure logic. Because the left side of the brain emphasized abstract thought rather than concrete images, man was able to conceive of abstract concepts like justice and destiny. Logic, the "if / then" syllogism, replaced the right side of the brain's emphasis on omens, visions and intuition. Finally and most importantly, the evolution of all these abilities combined to allow man to conceive of objective science, a code of law and an imageless deity.

People always have striven to have control over the forces of nature. Developing this new left-brain dominated religion allowed man to take a huge step in that direction. Moving God into the realm of an imageless deity, and moving Him out of nature, allowed man to strip nature of its sacredness and increase his perception that he controlled nature. Once literate, he developed logic and science, which demystified nature, and mathematics, which enabled him to keep track of time without the assistance of the moon.

The major shift to a text-based religion mandated the destruction of other types of worship. When the destruction of the high places was finally complete, the study of Torah replaced it. As we read in 2 Chronicles:

> And the Lord established the kingdom in his [Jehoshaphat's] hand; and all Judah brought to Jehoshaphat presents....moreover he took away the high places and the Asherim from Judah. And in the third year of his reign he sent his princes...to teach in the cities of Judah....And they taught in Judah, and had the Book of the Torah of the Lord with them, and went about throughout all the cities of Judah, and taught the people.[53]

Elsewhere in 2 Chronicles we read that the study of Torah replaced worship on high:

> Asa did that which was good and right in the eyes of the Lord his God. For he took away the altars of the foreign gods, and the high places, and broke down the images, and cut down the Asherim. He commanded Judah to seek the Lord God of their fathers, and to keep the Torah and the commandments. Also he took away from all the cities of Judah the high places and the sun images; and the kingdom was quiet under him.[54]

With Torah piety firmly in place, Jews were instructed to find all their answers about God and the world from the text. As we read in Psalm 119, "Happy are those whose way is blameless, who follow the teaching of the Lord...How can a young man keep his way pure? By holding to Your word."[55]

Man Liberated from Nature:

The destruction of the high places was only one step in the Jewish religion's dismantling of their people's perception of nature as powerful. Nature was stripped of its importance as creator of fertility, of provider of food and life in and of itself. For example, unlike those of most other

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53 2 Chron. 17: 5-7,9.

54 2 Chron. 14:1-4.

55 Ps. 119: 1,9.

cultures, the Jewish creation myth includes no natural sexual action. The absence of some form of deified conjoining of male and female is unique to the Jewish creation myth. The Torah offers the abstract, intellectual word of God, a male God who is responsible for women's barrenness, or fertility (see Gen. 4:1; 25:21; 29:31; 30:22-23.)

Judaism's spring festival, *Pesach*, provides another example of Judaism's seemingly antagonistic attitude towards nature. For many cultures, the spring festival involves praising the fertility of the soil, either through dance, prayer, music, sexual activity or sacrifices. The Jewish festival certainly has symbols to remind us that spring is the time of renewal and rebirth (i.e. eggs, parsley etc.) But another major theme of *Pesach* is deprivation. Perhaps at this time of seasonal rebirth Jews might be inclined to think that the earth controlled fertility and so it was imperative to remind them that God controls the earth. For example, yeast, the essence of bread and the symbol of fertility so long connected with earth's abundance, is denied to the Jews. The given explanation is that Jews refrain from eating yeast products because at the time of the Exodus Jews did not have time to let the bread rise. How inconsistent that they had time to gather the Egyptians' jewels of silver and gold but did not have time to pack yeast![55] More likely the prohibition against yeast is another successful attempt to reserve the power of fertility for God.

We see additional evidence of the attempt to diminish the perceived power of nature when we read about the Jews wandering in the desert. The

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[55]Exod. 12:33-36.

text severs the connection between nature and food by introducing manna. Manna, a most unnatural substance, does not even grow up from the ground. It falls from the sky in specific amounts on the days commanded by God.

As nature's role continues to diminish, theophany ceases to occur in random outdoor locations. God is said to dwell in the Ark and theophany now occurs in the Tent of Meeting and later in the curtained area called the Holy of Holies.[56]

A Look at Four of the Ten Commandments:

The Ten Commandments provide further evidence of Judaism's desire to eliminate the independent power of nature. In nature, procreation generally requires a male and female and sexual activity. This unity is represented in the creation myths of most cultures either by a female Goddess and her consort, male and female partners or some type of masturbation. The Jewish creation myth is the first to include none of these. The very first commandment "I am *Adonai* (the Lord) *Elohecha* (your God) and the second commandment, "you will have no other *elohim* (gods) beside me," describe a God that is masculine, since the primary names for God are male: Elohim and Adonai.[57] Shlaim explains the impact of these commandments:[58]

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[56]Exod. 25:8 "And let them make me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them." And Ex 29:42-43: "...at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting before the Lord. For there I will meet with you, and there I will speak with you, and there I will meet with the Israelites, and it shall be sanctified by My presence."

[57] In the first century C.E. the rabbis identify the Shekina as the feminine aspect of God. Shlain, The *Alphabet*, p. 82.

> The First [*sic*] Commandment declares that Yahweh will not tolerate mention of a Goddess....And given that all people acknowledge that life is a conjoining of masculine and feminine principles, the exclusion of any feminine presence from the First Commandment makes it the most radical sentence ever written.[60]

Judaism, a text-based religion, was likely the first religion to create a God that had neither both female and male aspects nor a counterpart of the opposite sex, a balance universally present in the natural world. The Deity of the Jews is outside the realm of nature, not bounded by the limitations of nature.

The continuation of the second commandment, well before "Thou shall not murder or steal," is "You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters below the earth."[61] This is often explained as a prohibition against the making of idols, but that is not what the text says. The text instructs us to *make no images of anything on earth or in heaven*. The command appears again elsewhere in Deuteronomy:

> Lest you corrupt yourselves, and make you an engraved image, the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any beast that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, the likeness of any thing that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the waters beneath the earth.[62]

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[59] What Shlain and other scholars count as the first commandment the Jewish tradition considers to be one and two.

[60] Shlain, The *Alphabet*, p. 82.

[61] Deut. 5:8.

[62] Deut. 6:16-18.

Why would an image of a bird create such a threat? Perhaps in the delicate time of transition from an image-based religion (nature is observed through images) to a text-based one, any image remained a threat to the new alphabet-loving religion. As Shlain writes:

> "Make no images" is a ban on right-brain pattern recognition. All who obey it will unconsciously begin to turn their backs on the art and imagery of the Great Mother and, reoriented a full 180 degrees, will instead seek protection and instruction from the written words of an All-Powerful Father. [63]

The third commandment further intensifies the power of the word. Man is prohibited from misuse of God's name. The very word has taken on such importance that it is now a source of great power and therefore must not be misused.

The power of words and names in particular is also found in Genesis. One would expect that the first task God would give man would be to do something fundamental to his survival like gather food or wood for a fire. But it is not. Instead, the first task God gives to man is to name the animals. The power of the word is the power by which man will "till and tend," "subdue and have dominion" over the earth".[64] The Ancients believed that knowing something's name enabled one to control it. As John Passmore explains: "Possession of a thing's name is to have power over it."[65]

The fourth commandment is the keeping of the Sabbath. The Sabbath is in essence a directive to keep track of time without the aid of natural cycles. A

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[63]Shlain, *The Alphabet*, p. 83.

[64]Gen. 1:28, 2:15.

seven-day cycle does not exist in nature. Quarters of the moon can not accurately or easily be observed.[66] The instruction to keep count of the days frees man from a reliance on nature to calculate time. As Daniel Boorstein, author of The Discoverers, writes:

> So long as man marked his life only by the cycles of nature -- the changing seasons, the waxing or waning moon -- he remained a prisoner of nature. If he was to go his own way and fill his world with human novelties, he would have to make his own measures of time.[67]

Although the Assyrians and Babylonians probably invented the seven-day week, the Sabbath, a weekly day of rest based on a cycle completely independent of a natural cycle, is a Jewish invention.[68] Zerubavel notes that: "the dissociation of the week from a natural cycle such as the waxing and waning of the moon can be seen as part of the general movement toward introducing a supranatural deity."[69]

The Sabbath as a weekly celebration did not become an integral part of Jewish practice until the fall of the first temple in 586 B.C.E., by which time literacy was firmly rooted.[70] The creation of holy time enabled the Israelites to continue this sacred practice, despite the destruction of their temple. Sacred time replaced sacred space, allowing the religion to continue in exile but

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[65] John Passmore, *Man's Responsibility for Nature*, p. 9.

[66] A moon cycle is 29 days, 12 hours, 44 minutes and 3 seconds. From moon to moon, about 29.5306 days elapse. (Eviater Zerubavel *The Seven Day Circle*, p. 9)

[67] Daniel Boorstein, *The Discoverers*, p. 12.

[68] Zerubavel, *The Seven Day Circle*, p. 8.

[69] Ibid., 11.

[70] Theophile Meek, *The Sabbath in the Old Testament*, p. 209.

further alienating Judaism from the concreteness of nature as religious practice became more abstract.

According to Meek and other scholars, the Sabbath was originally a full moon celebration.[71] We know that the full moon was originally a feast day for the ancient Israelites.[72] As we read in Psalm 81:4 "Blow the horn on the new moon, on the full moon for our feast day." Meek hypothesizes that the full moon celebration and the original Sabbath are one and the same. His theory is substantiated by the Tanach's parallel use of Sabbath and new moon[73] as well as the activities that were prohibited and permitted on that day.[74]

The move from a full moon celebration to a weekly ritual could easily be attained by substituting the word "*sheva*," meaning seven, for the word "SH-B-T." One motivation for ending the practice of observing Shabbat as the full moon celebration might have been to distinguish fully between biblical Israelites, whose worship was to be based on a weekly schedule independent from natural cycles, and their neighbors, whose calendar was based on the moon and accompanied by lunar worship.[75] The Sabbath thus lost its association with the moon and become a celebration associated with the

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[71] This idea was presented by Zimmern in 1904, Meinhold in 1905, later by Beer and Marti, all of whose works are in German. For English presentation see Meek, *The Sabbath,* p. 201.

[72]For opposing argument see William Hallo, *New Moons and Sabbath,* p. 9.

[73]Amos. 8:4, Hos. 2:13, Isa. 1:13, 2 Kings 4:23 Isa. 66:23, Ezek. 45:17 and 46:3, Neh. 10:34, Isa. 66:23, 1 Chron. 23:31, 2 Chron. 2:3, 8:13, 31:3.

[74]For complete argument please see Meek, *The Sabbath,* pp. 201-212.

[75] William Hallo, *New Moons and Sabbath,* pp. 16-17.

seventh day, as we read in Ex. 31:15: "Six days may work be done, but on the seventh day, there shall be a Sabbath of complete rest."

Thus even the Sabbath, which began as a celebration linked to the natural cycle of the moon, became disassociated with nature and linked instead to the abstract counting of time, the linear based seven-day week.

Positive Effects of a Text-Based Religion:

Although the move to a text-based religion did have a negative impact on humanity's relationship with nature, it had many positive ramifications. The move from the monolatry of Abraham's time to the monotheism presented by Moses was revolutionary. Equally revolutionary was that for the first time there existed a codified law, a moral standard to which all were obligated and from which none, not even the kings, were exempt. Humanity was freed from the idea that the gods controlled destiny, and individuals were empowered to choose their own future, to choose blessing or curse, life or death.

The new religion was accessible to all who were literate, and therefore broke down economic boundaries. The words written in the Tanach brought protection to widows, orphans, slaves, common folk, and the poor. For the first time God was perceived primarily, although certainly not exclusively, as a judge. The theoretical concept of constant evaluation from the deity coerced people to behave ethically and morally in this life, rather than to believe they could wait until afterlife for punishment or reward.

The new text-based religion of Judaism taught people a new way to think and thus enabled them to develop such concepts as political science and physics. One need only look around at the marvelous accomplishments of western culture to witness the remarkable gifts that the Jewish text-based tradition has brought the world.

The Movement toward Balance:

Once literacy was firmly established amongst the Jews and the Torah was the uncontested center of the religion, nature no longer posed a threat. We see in the writings of the Rabbis an attempt to recreate a connection with nature. For example, the Midrash interprets the biblical verse "This month shall mark for you the beginning of months" to mean that a witness had to be sent outside and actually observe the moon in order to declare the new month.[76] The halacha is set according to this Midrash, even though the actual biblical text does not even mention the moon, let alone speak about observing it. The thinking of the biblical and rabbinic authors clearly was different in respect to what role the observance of natural cycles should have in Judaism.

Chapter Three will discuss in detail the rabbinic attitude toward nature and the plethora of laws they promulgated in support of the environment. Granted, the rabbinic laws were based on respect for God, but nonetheless they do show a sympathetic attitude toward nature. Part of what enabled them to

[76]Exod. 12:2; Midrash Rabbah 7, 2.

do this was the process of the oral law itself. The oral law was not written down until much later. The aggadic stories of the Midrash and the Talmud engaged the right side of the brain, which as we have seen, seems to foster a connection to nature.

In recent decades our culture has witnessed a resurgence of the power of the right side of the brain. The advent of television, photography and cinema drastically altered the way we perceive our world. Interestingly, as the image gains power in our culture the status of women is improved, and interest in nature is renewed.

In Judaism we are seeing a rise in activities processed by the right-brain. Many of our temples are once again filled with music, dance, creative liturgy, and song. In Reform, Reconstructionist and some Conservative congregations, women sit next to men and lead prayer services as equals. The buzz words "transformative experience," "experiential education," and "spirituality," which buck against the intellectual confinement of years of text study, have become part of the Jewish lexicon. New and creative ways to continue our interpretive tradition are continually being explored.

We are now in an exciting time when we have the opportunity finally to reach a balance between the right and left sides of the brain, between text and image, between intellect and emotion. In the mingling of the two we will ensure Judaism's strength and longevity.

Chapter Two
Biblical Attitudes about Nature

During the last thirty years, environmentalists and religious figures have debated over whether according to Jewish teachings man, in relation to nature, is commanded to be despot or a steward.[1] It has been suggested that one obstacle to the reconciliation of the argument is that the Bible's environmental attitudes are being examined through a modern environmentalist lens.[2] Scholars such as Jeanne Kay suggest that a literal reading of the Bible can help resolve the debate. Kay writes: "When the Bible is examined in its own terms, rather than in those of current environmentalism, the Bible's own perspectives on nature and human ecology emerge."[3]

In this chapter we will look at a literal reading of the Bible to gain another perspective on Jewish attitudes about nature. This is not to discount the importance of either commentaries or the Oral Law tradition, but rather to give a foundation of the "*p'shat*", the simple meaning, upon which we may build. Teachers of commentary and Midrash repeatedly tell us to begin any study of text by understanding the literal meaning of the text.[4]

The literal reading of the Bible reveals that the natural world functions both as an entity independent of humanity, which has its own covenant with

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[1] We will discuss this in detail in Chapter Three.

[2] See Robin Attfield, *The Ethics of Environmental Concern;* Clarence J. Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century*, p. 166.

[3] Jeanne Kay, "Concepts of Nature in the Hebrew Bible," p. 312.

God and its own ways of communicating with its Maker, and as an entity dependent on human behavior and acting as an intermediary between God and humanity. The anthropomorphic language used to describe nature's role seems sentimental, perhaps even jarring to our modern sensibilities (Valleys that shout praise? Mountains that sing with joy?) but through their word choices the authors reveal their attitudes about nature.

Part One: Nature's Unique Status and Importance to God

We are familiar with the verse from Genesis that assigns humanity dominion over nature.[5] However, humanity and animals are connected in many non-hierarchical ways, suggesting similarities in their status before God. For example, humans and animals are both created on the sixth day of creation. The word that is used for both is the same; the animals are called "*nefesh chayah*"[6] (translated living creature) and man is called "*nefesh chayah*"[7] (translated living soul). Building on this we notice that the term *ruach*, the breath of life with which God animates all life[8], is used in relation to both man and animals: "that which befalls the sons of men befalls the beasts...as the one dies, so the other dies, they have all one breath (*ruach*)."[9]

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[4]i.e. Dr. Edward Goldman of Hebrew Union College.
[5]Gen. 1:28.
[6]Gen. 1:20.
[7]Gen. 2:7.
[8]see Ps. 104:30 "You send forth Your *ruach* they are created."
[9]Eccles. 3:19,21.

This passage expresses the obvious ultimate leveler of all living creatures: death.

We can see a connection between God's treatment of humanity and nature in the covenants God creates with each. God commands both Adam and the animals to be fruitful and multiply.[10] Although plants do not receive a command, they are given the capacity to reproduce themselves, which links them to the others in a similar fashion. The covenant that God makes with Noah after the Flood also includes humans, animals and all life on earth, which would include the plants:

> I establish my covenant with you, and with your seed after you; and with every living creature that is with you -- birds, cattle, and every wild beast as well -- all that have come out of the ark, every living thing on earth. [11]

Both humanity and animals are told what they can and cannot eat. From the time of Adam until Noah they were not permitted to eat flesh:

> And to all the animals on land, to all the birds of the sky, and to everything that creeps on earth, in which there is the breath of life, [I give] all the green plants for food.[12]

After the Flood, they may eat flesh, but not of their own species: "But for your own life-blood I will require a reckoning: I will require it of every beast."[13]

Even the laws of Sabbath demonstrate the connection between the status of humanity and animals before God, as animals must also be allowed to rest on the Shabbat:

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[10]"Be fertile and increase, fill the waters in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth." (Gen. 1:22) and "Be fruitful and multiply." Gen. 1:28.

[11]Gen. 9:9-10.

[12]Gen. 1:30.

> But the seventh day is a Sabbath of the Lord your God; you shall not do any work -- you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your ox or your ass, or your cattle.[14]

We know that a) God gave humanity dominion over the earth and b) in many cases God placed humanity and the natural world on a similar, if not the same, status level. From this we learn that although humanity does have dominion over the earth, in the Bible it is out of respect and not arrogance.

The natural world also has its own private relationship with God, completely distinct from humanity. For example in Job God causes "it to rain on a land where no man is; on the wilderness wherein there is no man,[15] and God has made the wilderness to be a home for the wild ass who does not interact with humanity.[16] In Psalms we read of God taking care of animals: "He sends the springs into the valleys...they give drink to every wild beast; the wild asses quench their thirst."[17]

God's relationship with the natural world includes a very difficult element for us to understand. The text says that nature is commanded to praise God:

> Praise the Lord, O you who are on earth, all sea monsters and ocean depths, fire and hail, snow and smoke, storm wind that executes His command, all mountains and hills, all fruit trees and cedars, all wild and tamed beasts, creeping things and winged birds.[18]

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[13]Gen. 9:5.
[14]Deut. 5:14.
[15]Job 38:26.
[16]Job 39:5-6.
[17]Ps. 104:10-11.
[18]Ps. 148:3-10.

There are many other examples: the earth sings and worships God,[19] the "little hills" rejoice and the valleys "shout for joy."[20] One understanding of this kind of anthropomorphism is that it serves to indicate to humanity that majesty in the world proclaims for God's greatness. When viewing a breathtaking stand of yellow aspen on fresh, white snow against a clear, blue sky, the biblical authors would interpret the beauty of the scene to be the earth's way of praising God. This interpretation coincides with Judaism's theocentric worldview.

The biblical authors understood nature to have a unique and meaningful relationship with the Creator. By studying creation and covenant, we learn that nature is implicitly important to God and has its own status independent of its relationship with humanity. Clearly nature is important to God, and for this reason alone Jews must treat the natural world with care.

Part II: Nature as a Tool for Divine Reward and Retribution

> The model of nature as God's instrument of divine reward and retribution may be out of favor with theologians and environmentalist today, but it clearly fits [into] the scope of biblical texts [more] than the despot or stewardship models, which are more recent innovations.[21]

Divine reward and retribution are indeed principle functions of nature as viewed in a literal reading of the Bible. It is difficult for our modern sensibilities to reconcile the ancient belief that sinning against God would

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[19]Ps. 66:1,4.

[20]Ps. 65:13-15.

[21]Jeanne Kay, "Concepts," p. 312.

cause drought or that following the act of mitzvot would bring rain. Our ancestors did not have the benefit of our scientific and technological know-how. The text illustrates that they believed their behavior resulted in environmental consequences. As written in Deuteronomy:

> If, then, you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day...I will grant the rain for your land in season, the early rain and the late...and thus you shall eat your fill. Take care not to be lured away to serve other gods and bow to them. For the Lord's anger will flare up against you, and He will shut up the skies so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce.[22]

In the Bible, people who sin lose their right to dominate nature and are instead dominated by nature. As Midrash Rabbah explains: "R. Hanina said: If he merits it, [God says,] *'uredu'* (have dominion); while if he does not merit, [God says,] *'yerdu'* (let the beasts rule over him.)"[23] Nature is used by God to master humanity. For example we find that a great fish swallows the disobedient Jonah. After he repents, "the Lord commanded the fish and it spewed Jonah out upon dry land."[24] In 2 Kings children who are teasing the prophet Elisha are mangled by a bear.[25] A third example of animals' ascendancy over humans occurs in the story of Balaam and his ass: as long as Balaam tries to curse God, the ass is the one to dictate the direction of travel and to see the angel of God. [26]

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[22] Deut. 11:13-17.
[23] Genesis Rabbah, 8:12.
[24] Jon. 2:14.
[25] 2 Kings 23-24.
[26] Num. 22:23-33.

Even God's punishment of the first human is enacted through nature:

> Because you did as your wife said and ate of the tree about which I commanded you, "You shall not eat of it,' cursed be the ground because of you....Thorns and thistles shall it sprout for you. [27]

Later, Cain's crime of murder is also punished through retribution of the earth:

> What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood cries to me from the ground. And now cursed are you from the earth, which has opened her mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. [28]

Note the intriguing difference between these two situations. In the former, the ground is cursed because of Adam's offenses. Nature, an innocent bystander, is punished for Adam's disobedience. In the latter, the earth punishes Cain. Both punishments however, yield the same result: the bounty of the earth is diminished, affecting the entire community. Although a human may sin as an individual, the consequences extend to the entire community. Just as the sins of father are visited upon the children, so too, the sins of the individual are visited upon the earth.

Biblical justice implies that no one lives in isolation. We are all part of the grand web of life, and must act responsibly so as to protect the people with whom we live as well as the land upon which we depend. The repercussions of immoral behavior extend far beyond the domain of the sinner.

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[27]Gen. 3:17.

[28]Gen. 4:10.

In contrast, nature is also used to help the Israelites. In Joshua, God holds back the waters of the Jordan River to enable the both the priests carrying the Ark and the Israelites to cross:

> But as soon as the bearers of the Ark reached the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the Ark dipped into the water at its edge, the waters coming upstream piled up in a single heap....The priests who bore the Ark of the Lord's Covenant stood on dry land exactly in the middle of the Jordan, while all Israel crossed over on dry land, until the entire nation had finished crossing the Jordan. [29]

Elijah the Tishbite, one of the most righteous, is kept alive by the ravens in accordance with God's orders:

> The word of the Lord came to him: "Leave this place; turn eastward and go into hiding....I have commanded the ravens to feed you there."...He proceeded to do as the Lord had bidden....The ravens brought him bread and meat every morning and every evening, and he drank from the wadi.[30]

Nor is Daniel killed while in the lion's den; he trusts in God and therefore is protected by God. Says Daniel: "My God sent His angel who shut the mouths of the lions so that they did not injure me."[31]

The biblical authors understood nature to be a potent force that would either assist or harm them, depending on their behavior and the will of God. Our biblical ancestors were surrounded by the power of nature and were respectful of it. Further, since all moral deeds were believed to be rewarded or punished by impacts on the land, it was believed that even one person's

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[29]"This is comparable to the Israelites and the sea -- a reenactment of redemption."- Rabbi Sheldon Zimmerman, Josh. 3:15-17.

[30]1 Kings 17:2-6.

actions could cause horrific environmental damage harming the entire community. The literal reading of the text teaches us a vital lesson, still relevant today: All beings are united in one web of life; every one's action impacts every other.

Part III: Nature's Use as a Medium for Theophany
A. Location of Theophany

> But will God really dwell on earth? Even the heavens to their uttermost reaches cannot contain You, how much less this House that I have built![32]

Although modern Jewish theology understands God to be omnipresent, throughout the *Tanach* God only appears in a specific place at a specific time. Nature frequently serves as the medium for God's appearance. The most common place for theophany to occur is near bodies of water, trees and mountains, locations that are considered especially conducive to interactions between the divine and earthly realms.[33]

According to the Psalmists, heaven is the divine realm and earth the realm of man: "The Lord is in His holy palace...His throne is in heaven."[34] "The Lord looks down from heaven on mankind."[35] "The Lord...will answer him from His heavenly sanctuary."[36] Water, trees and especially mountains provide geographic opportunities for contact and communication between

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[31]Dan. 6:21-23.
[32]1 Kings 8:27.
[33]Theodore Hiebert, "Theophany in the Old Testament," p. 505.
[34]Ps. 11:4.
[35]Ps. 14:2.

the divine and earthly realms. On a mountain peak, God can enter the earthly realm while remaining in heaven. As Nehemiah describes: "You came down on Mount Sinai and spoke to them from heaven."[37]

Water was believed to flow from a divine source, thus creating a bridge between two worlds. So, for example, an angel of the Lord finds Hagar at a spring: "An angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness."[38] And Jacob wrestled with "a divine being" at a stream.[39]

Trees were believed to link three worlds; their roots extending downward into the underworld, their limbs outward into the earthly realm, and their trunks upward into the abode of God. For example, the Lord appeared to Abraham at a tree in Moreh: "at the terebinth[40] of Moreh....The Lord appeared to Abram."[41]

Mountains are the most common location for theophanies. Their dramatic topography and their peaks rising into the clouds of the heavens provided an awesome home for the deity. It was also believed that mountains extended downward into the foundation of the earth.[42] Thus, the bulk of the mountain stood in the earthly realm and provided a strategic location for people to live. With a vantage point of the horizon, the mountain was easily

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[36]Ps. 20:7.
[37]Neh. 9:13.
[38]Gen. 16:7.
[39]Gen. 32:23-33.
[40]A terebinth is a small European tree in the sumac family.
[41] Gen. 12:6-7.
[42]Ps. 46:3, Ps. 104:5-9.

defensible, and it generally had water springs to provide reliable water sources.

Mountains also served as the major location from which God interacted with the Israelites. The most intimate revelation occurs, of course, at Mt. Sinai: "Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain."[43] Later, to facilitate interaction between the Israelites and the deity, a permanent dwelling place is constructed for God at the summit of Mt. Moriah. God also appears to Elijah at Mt. Carmel[44] and to Moses at Mt. Horeb: "And Moses kept the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law, the priest of Midian; and he led the flock far away into the desert, and came to the mountain of God, to Horeb."[45]

Although many theophanies occurred in natural settings, others did not. Judges 13:2-3, Amos 7:4 and Job 38:1 are all examples in which, although the form is natural, the location is not specified. Additionally, in Exodus 40:34-38 and Numbers 10:35-36 the Ark determines the location of theophanies. Thus we learn that although natural locations may be conducive for contact with the deity, they are not the exclusive domain of theophany. Amos 9:1-4 articulates for us that God does indeed dwell everywhere, and consequently the potential to reveal the divine is everywhere both in nature and man.

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[43]Exod. 19:3.

[44]1 Kings 18.

[45]Exod. 3:1.

B. Form of Theophany

In Scripture, theophanies generally take the form of either a person or a natural feature. God frequently appears in the guise of important figures in the Israelite culture: as a King and Lawgiver (Exodus 19), as a Warrior (Exodus 15), and as a Judge (Psalm 94:1-3). Although these are only a few of many societal-based examples, the most common form of theophany was the thunderstorm, with God appearing as thunder, fire, cloud, wind, lightning and/or rain.

Why a thunderstorm? The thunderstorm was likely the most powerful natural phenomena witnessed in the Middle Eastern climate. With its torrential rains, relentless wind, driving hail, darkness, thunder and lightning, the thunderstorm had power to destroy crops and homes and to kill animals and people.[46] At the same time the rain was necessary for the sustenance of a rain-dependent eco-system.[47] Thus the thunderstorm, with its power to destroy or sustain, could also be seen as an appropriate manifestation of the powers of God.

It is difficult for many contemporaries to understand the anthropomorphization of God, and equally difficult to believe God appeared as a thunderstorm. But our ancestors do not appear to be troubled by either form of theophany. They believed that to be more accessible to humans, God took a human form at times, and at other times, used nature. Why did they believe that God could be contained? To the Israelites, God was

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[46]Exod. 15:7-10.

simultaneously present in nature, and therefore transcendent. They believed certain natural phenomena, including the thunderstorm, were created by the intensification of God's presence in a certain place at a certain time.

One must not mistake this view of God's intimate involvement with nature for the pantheistic view that nature and God are one in the same. God remains involved with, yet distinct from, nature. Exodus 3:4, the story of the burning bush, provides one illustration. When Moses is approaching the bush he appears to have no awareness that he is on "sacred ground." Although the text has stated that he is in the area of "Horeb, the mountain of God," Moses does not show in any way that he is aware of the holiness of the mountain. And why is it called the mountain of God? If in fact Mt. Horeb and Mt. Sinai are interchangeable, as they seem to be, the mention of Horeb as the mountain of God may be a foreshadow of the revelation at Sinai. (Interestingly, the choice of the word *"s'neh"*, or bush, also foretells the event to come at Sinai.)[48]

Prior to God's speech from the bush, the area is not holy. However, once God has established God's presence in the bush, the area becomes holy and Moses is instructed to remove his footgear.

> And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the midst of the bush, and said, "Moses, Moses." And he said, "Here am I." And He said, "Do not come any closer; take off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground.[49]

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[47]Ps. 68:9-10.

[48]Nahum Sarna, *Exploring Exodus*, pp. 40-41.

[49]Exod. 3:4-5.

Once God's voice leaves the bush, the area is no longer sacred. Moses does not seek to return to that exact spot, nor does it become a mecca for pilgrims.

A similar situation occurs in Joshua 5:13-15. We are told that Joshua comes upon the presence of the captain of the Lord's host in some nondescript place outside of Jericho. Joshua is ignorant of any special status of the place until the captain of the Lord's hosts presents himself and orders: "Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy."[50] Once again, the spot ceases to be sacred when the revelatory moment passes.

Elijah's experience of God articulates a sophisticated awareness of God's presence within and separateness from nature:

> "Come out," He called, "and stand on the mountain before the Lord." And behold, the Lord passed by. There was a great and mighty wind, splitting the mountain and shattering the rocks by the power of the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind; after the wind -- an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake -- fire; but the Lord was not in the fire. After the fire -- a still small voice.[51]

Nature once again provides the medium with which one can experience the intensified presence of God at a particular time.

Although God is not nature, creation and God are intricately linked to each other. Creation relies upon God for its formation, its sustenance and ultimately its continued existence. God uses nature as a medium with which

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[50]Josh. 5:15.

[51]1 Kings 19:11-12.

to interact with the realm of humans as well as, in general, a place in which to dwell. In Ronald Simkins' opinion:

> There is no reality apart from God and the creation. There is no realm for God to dwell in other than creation. Therefore, God's presence is necessarily in the creation, and God's actions are limited by and expressed in terms of the creation.[52]

Creation may not be the only place in which God may dwell, because God existed before heaven and earth. However, creation is clearly the medium in which God interacts with man.

Terence Fretheim explains that the intimate relationship between God and nature, between Creator and creation, enables nature to reveal God. Fretheim goes on to say that embedded in nature is an aspect of divinity that is intensified through theophany: "The fact that theophanies function as revelatory events means that the function of nature in the theophany is only an intensification of what is true of nature otherwise."[53] So for example, the bush at Mt. Horeb always contained an aspect of God because God created it. When God wished to appear to Moses, God intensified the Divine presence in the bush, and afterwards, allowed the Divine presence to dissipate from the bush. This is not to suggest that the bush itself is in any way divine; it is a medium. As noted earlier, God chooses the natural world to reveal God because nature is "internally related" to God. This may be the strongest argument available in Judaism for environmental protection.

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[52]Ronald Simkins, *Creator and Creation*, p. 151.
[53]Ibid.

Summary:

In this chapter we have examined the biblical text literally in order to increase our understanding of the biblical author's attitudes about nature. We learned that according to the biblical narrative, nature has its own intrinsic value to God, independent of its usefulness to humanity. Additionally, God uses the natural world for divine retribution and reward. But the most intimate connection between creation and God is expressed through theophany. The awareness that nature is important to God and that within the natural realm is the potential for the appearance of the Deity should be all the incentive we need to treat our natural environment with care and respect.

Chapter Three
Rabbinic Attitudes about Nature: Dominion or Stewardship?

> God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the sky, the cattle, and over the whole earth...." And God created man in his image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.[1] God blessed them and God said to them, "Be fruitful, and multiply, fill the earth and master it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that moves on the earth.[2]

In 1967, Lynn White, a historian of medieval technology and a devout Christian, wrote an article entitled "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" which shocked the small religious-ecological community.[3] White's article claimed that Western Christianity in general, and Genesis 1:26-28 specifically, bore "a huge burden of guilt" for the current ecological crisis.[4] The numerous responses generated by the article inculpated Judaism as well. With its biblical command to "fill the earth and master it," the Judeo-Christian ethic, many environmentalists claimed, was the theological and ethical source for our anthropocentric, and therefore exploitive relationship with the earth.

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[1] I have chosen to use masculine names for God in this chapter. This does not mean that I think God is male. But I do believe that the biblical authors and our early sages did believe God was male. I feel that in an academic discussion it would be misrepresentative to alter their word choice simply because it disagrees with some modern ideas. I look at the masculine names for God as an opportunity to understand how they perceived the Deity.

I have also chosen to use "man" instead of "humanity" much of the time in this chapter. It is my opinion, and I understand many readers will disagree, that the body of law addressed in this chapter was written by men and was intended primarily for men. To the readers who find my choices offensive, I apologize.

[2] Gen. 1:26-28.

[3] Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis."

Several of White's arguments are quite valid, and deserve closer study. Others are erroneous in their application to Judaism, which has a long tradition of ecological awareness. In Part One of this chapter we shall examine White's and his colleagues' attempts to prove that Judaism advocates a confrontational, utilitarian relationship with nature. In Part Two we shall examine Jewish texts, which clearly show that Judaism fosters a relationship of stewardship with nature.

Part One: How Judaism Advocates a Utilitarian Relationship with Nature

Cyclical vs. Linear Time:

White recognized that one of the differences between Judaism and paganism is each religion's conception of time. The pagan view of time is cyclical; the Jewish view is linear. The cyclical view is based on the natural cycles of the earth and holds that everything that is has been before and will be again. The sun rises and sets, rises and sets, winter follows autumn, autumn follows summer, and summer follows spring. Natural cycles repeat themselves continually. Change is illusory. This perspective engenders an attitude of respect toward the natural environment, because nature exists as it should be and should not be altered.

By introducing a linear sense of time to the world, Judaism introduced the concept that not only made change possible -- as it was not in a cyclical view of time -- but it became an injunction: "Be fertile and increase, fill the

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[4] Ibid., p.27.

earth and master it".[5] As Eilon Schwartz writes: "A sense of history demands that human beings break out of the cycle and accept the responsibility of a history that can move forward and backward."[6]

Creation stories illustrate the differences between cyclical and linear time concepts. The stories reveal basic truths about how each group views itself in relation to the world. For example, in the cyclical view of time there can be no "beginning." As White explained, "Like Aristotle, the intellectuals of the ancient West denied that the visible world had a beginning. Indeed, the idea of a beginning was impossible in the framework of their cyclical notion of time."[7] In contrast, Judaism, with a linear view of time, offers a linear story of creation that progresses in gradual stages, culminating in the creation of man. From the progression from night and day, to plants, fish, animals and eventually humanity, White concluded: "God planned all of this explicitly for man's benefit and rule; no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man's purposes."[8]

In "The Unnatural Jew," Steven Schwarzschild adds a moral dimension to the discussion of changing nature. Schwarzschild writes: "Judaism and Jewish culture have paradigmatically and throughout history operated with a fundamental dichotomy between nature ('what is') and ethics (i.e., God and

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[5]Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History : The Myth of the Eternal Return*, p.104.
[6]Eilon Schwartz, "Judaism and Nature," p. 442.
[7]White, p. 24.
[8] Ibid., p. 25.

man -- 'what ought to be')."[9] In linear time, man empowered with the knowledge of good and evil, is able to break the cycle of nature and impose morality onto an otherwise amoral world. Schwarzschild asserts that we are not a part of nature but above nature, because "God created man in his image, in the image of God He created him."[10] Quoting from Psalms 8:4 Schwarzschild continues: "For when I see Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars that you established -- what is man?...You have set him as ruler of the work of your hands. You have laid all under his feet."[11]

Michael Wyschogrod carries Schwarzschild's argument a step further, claiming that humanity's role is to impose morality onto nature. He discusses Hitler and Nazis as the proof of the danger of learning moral law from nature. "Evolutionary morality is the right of the stronger to destroy the weaker," he claims and goes on to say "Nature wants the weak to perish. The weak contribute to the march of evolution by perishing; and when they refuse to perish, then the weaker have triumphed over the stronger."[12] Perhaps we should not say that nature actually "wants" something to happen; but we do know that nature does allow the weak to die. The natural order is not to protect the good, the kind or the morally upright; generally speaking in the so-called "natural order" it is the most fit who survive. Judaism interferes

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[9] Schwarzschild, p. 88.

[10] Gen. 1:27.

[11] Schwarzschild, p. 94.

[12] Michael Wyschogrod "Judaism and the Sanctification of Nature," pp. 6-7.

with the "natural order," however, by protecting the orphan, the widow, and the blind person. Judaism allows the weak to survive, because we have been taught by God, the prophets and our texts that to protect the weak is morally correct because all were created in God's image.

The line of this argument, then, is as follows: Paganism operated with a cyclical view of time that viewed change as impossible and therefore engendered respect for the natural state of the world. Judaism, a religion based on history, introduced the concept of linear time to the world and thereby moved humanity into the realm of progressive change. Not only could we affect the natural world, but Genesis 1:26-28 mandated us to do so. This mandate evolved into our current exploitation of the earth. Therefore, according to this line of reasoning Judaism is indeed responsible for our current ecological crisis.

Excising the Guardian Spirits:

The creation story culminating in the creation of man and the injunction for man to *"v'kivshuha"* (subdue the earth) had powerful implications. Man no longer needed to live in fear of gods or powerful spirits that dwelled in brooks, streams, groves and mountains. As the idea that God created nature replaced antiquity's belief in animism (that nature was god) people no longer had to be so cautious about how they treated the earth. White writes: "By destroying Pagan Animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference."[13]

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[13] Lynn White, p. 12.

By excising the gods that dwelled in nature, man was no longer subservient to nature. More than that, with the unique role granted to us in Genesis, we learn that it is God's will that man now dominate nature. When God allows Adam to name the animals He affirms Adam's dominance over them.[14] In this moment Adam -- and man -- is elevated to the dominant role. Maimonides comments on Genesis 1:26-28: "Act ye according to your will...to build and to uproot the planted and to dig out the mountains copper and so forth."[15] The understanding of nature's function has thus changed drastically, as Schwarzschild explains, "nature possesses no value it itself. Its value lies in its serviceability to man and to God."[16] Or, as White explains in contemporary language: "It is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends....We are superior to nature, contemptuous of it, willing to use it for our slightest whim."[17]

Schwarzschild writes "there is nothing 'wrong' with trees" but their function is to serve man.[18] As proof Schwarzschild contrasts the benedictions one is obliged to recite over a blooming tree to that which one recites over a tree that is not blooming and therefore not immediately useful to man. The first blessing is lengthy and stresses the utilitarian worth of nature: "Praised be You, oh Lord, our God, King of the world, who has not left a thing lacking in His world and created in it good creatures and good trees, so that human

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[14] Gen. 2:19-20.

[15] Marc Swetlitz, *Judaism and Ecology*, p. 92.

[16] Ibid., p. 90.

[17] Ibid., p. 12, 14.

beings can benefit from them."[19] The blessing over a tree that is not blossoming is very simple: "Praised be You, oh Lord, our God, King of the world, Who has such in His universe."[20]

Schwarzschild's view of the purpose of creation continues: "Even the sun itself was created to serve mankind." Quoting Leviticus Rabba he writes: "Resh Lakish said in the name of R. Simian b. Mensal, 'The first man was created for God's use and the disk of the sun for human use.'"[21]

Conclusion of Part One:

We can see how one could conclude from Genesis 1:26-28 that it was God's mandate that humanity's relationship to nature should be purely utilitarian. We can also see how the evolution from cyclical to linear time, and the introduction of a belief in a God who is separate from nature, could lead to the ethics and morality that might allow for the exploitation of the environment. However, Genesis is only part of our textual tradition, and Jewish text was not ever meant to be read in isolation.

In the remainder of this chapter we will survey Jewish text, laws and traditions which counter this perception that Judaism advocates a confrontational, utilitarian-only relationship with nature.

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[18]Ibid., p. 95.

[19]Berahot 43b Rosh Hashanah 11.

[20]*The Complete Artscroll Siddur*, p. 229; Berahot 58b.

[21]Lev. Rabba 20:2 as quoted in Swetlitz, *Judaism and Ecology*, p. 95.

Part Two:
How Judaism Advocates a Relationship of Stewardship with Nature

Boundaries around *V'kivshuha:*[22]

What is the meaning of *v'kivshuha*? We learn, as we continue to read in Genesis, that it is not a license for limitless exploitation. Immediately following the *v'kivshuha* verse, God restricts man's menu to plants and fruit. Neither humanity nor animal is permitted to eat flesh. Clearly then, man may not use nature at will. Not until after the Flood is man permitted to eat meat, and even then this permission is viewed as merely a concession, until a time when humans can control their violent instincts. Rav Abraham Kook explains that since man had become so violent, God allowed him to slaughter animals so as to vent his base inclinations, hoping this would enable him to cease from killing other men.[23] Eventually, he said, carnivorousness would give way to vegetarianism and man would learn to live respectfully and peacefully with both man and animals. Even when the eating of meat is permitted, it is restricted. As we read:

> Every creature that lives shall be yours to eat; as with the green grasses, I give you these. You must not however eat flesh with its life-blood in it. But for your own life-blood I will require a reckoning: I will require it of every beast; of man, too, will I require a reckoning for human life, of every man for that of his fellow man![24]

Clearly man does not have free reign to subdue or slaughter animals as he sees fit. Rather, God requires a conscientious attitude toward all slaughter.

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[22]Gen. 1:28; Usually translated "to subdue."

[23]Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Bereshit*, p.77.

Contrasting the Creation Stories:

The Torah opens with two distinctly different accounts of creation. Do they contradict each other? Since the Rabbis teach that nothing in the Bible can be contradictory, they must be complementary. We will look at their differences and then explore how they might clarify one another.

In the first creation story, the creating is done abstractly. God never gets His hands dirty. He takes chaos and orders it into light and darkness, then forms land, plants and animals, and finally, at the pinnacle of His creation, He creates man and woman in His image, and God commands them: "Be fertile and increase and fill the earth and master it."[25] God thus gives man -- and woman -- a clear directive to have dominion over the other creatures of the earth.

The second account is far less linear. The relationship between Creator (God), creation (Adam) and raw material (earth) is more intimate. Unlike the verbal creation in narration one, the creation of man in narration two is quite intimate: "God formed man (Adam) from the dust of the earth (adamah). He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being." The intimate relationship between Adam and God has now become a model for the intimate connection between Adam and adamah.

We now see that the order of creation is itself different and continuing. Man is the main character but not the pinnacle of creation. Heaven and earth are created first, then man, and it is not until after man is created that God

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[24] Gen. 9:3-5.

brings vegetation to earth, because before that, "there was no human to work the soil". In this version God forms Adam out of adamah, and then establishes a direct link between man and earth, by telling Adam that he must care for that from which he came. Man's continuing role as caretaker is solidified as God commands Adam to *"l'avedah u'l'shamrah"*"(to work it and to watch over it.)[26]

Combined, the two accounts offer a comprehensive picture of man's relationship with the earth. In the first, man is made "in God's image." We can consider how true this is in humanity's present situation. In many ways humanity's role today is god-like. Today's man has even greater ability to determine the fate of the earth, because he has the power to destroy it. However, the second account clarifies and abridges the power given humans, by defining the role of mankind as caretaker: master, yes, but destroyer or subduer, no.

The second account emphasizes man's connection with the earth and his responsibility as a tenant to be a careful steward. We learn the details of what "mastering" the planet means: there are trees from which man may eat and others from which he may not. We are given our first task of stewardship, the naming of the animals. The act of naming, a parental task, is an intimate interaction further affirming our role as caretaker.

Benno Jacob, writing in 1934, reminds us that what is important about the *"l'avedah u'leshamrah"* command is the Commander. It is God's garden, and

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[25] Gen. 1:28.

man must care for it not for the sake of ecology, but because it is God's creation:

> Adam's relationship to the Owner of the garden in the terminology of halakhah, Jewish law, is that of guardian. To guard may simply mean careful treatment and protection against damage. Primarily, however, this term is meant to characterize the garden as someone else's property. It is a garden that belongs to God, not to humanity.[27]

Midrash Rabbah also explains that tending of the earth is not an ecological or agricultural act but a religious one. The text draws a link between the words *"l'avdah u'leshamrah"* and *"t'avdum"* (serve) and *"tishmeru"* (observe) used in relation to Temple service

> *"L'avedah u'leshamrah,* To work it and to watch over it." This refers to the offerings [in the Temple]: "You shall serve *(t'avdum)* God upon this mountain" (Exod. 3:12) and "You shall observe*(tishmeru)* [the obligation] offering to Me." (Num. 28:2).[28]

By looking at only the first creation story, Lynn White and his supporters misunderstand the intent of the text. One must look at both accounts of creation to understand man's role. It is important to note that the primary motive of Genesis is not ecological, it is theological. However, man's role as steward can have positive ecological ramifications, since the biblical text teaches that the world was created by God, and belongs to God, and therefore must be treated with care.

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[26] Gen. 2:15.

[27] Daniel B. Fink, *Judaism and Ecology,* p. 25.

[28] Midrash Rabbah Bereshit 16:5.

Sabbath:

The tradition of observing the Sabbath also resolves this seeming contradiction of "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof" and "The heavens are the Lord's, but the earth He has given to mankind."[29] God has given man the strength and the intellect to rule the earth. Six days a week man is invited and mandated to use his ability to perfect God's creation, but on the seventh day, man is to refrain from his toil.

This means that Sabbath is a day on which we neither create nor destroy, but rather draw back from our work and appreciate the bounty of God's creation. The Day of Rest reminds us that despite agricultural fertilizers and insecticides, despite space shuttles, vaccines, and laser printers, God is the ultimate creator, next to whom our own abilities pale. Thus we do not have the right to exploit or destroy God's world.

The Sabbath blessings do not negate the importance of man's weekday role as creator, but the liturgy distinguishes between man's role during "ordinary time" and "Sabbath time."[30] Ultimately this is God's creation and therefore we are indeed morally obligated to care for God's earth responsibly.

Sabbatical and Jubilee Years:

> Six years you shall sow your land and gather its yield; but in the seventh you shall let it rest and lie fallow. Let the needy among your people eat of it, and what they leave let the wild beasts eat. You shall do the same with your vineyards and your olive groves. [31]

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[29] Ps. 24:1, Ps. 115:16.

[30] *The Complete Artscroll Siddur*, p. 621; *Gates of Prayer for Shabbat and Weekdays*, p. 174.

[31] Exod. 23:10-11.

The Sabbatical Year had profound ecological and social implications. This legislation demonstrates an advanced understanding of soil ecology, including the need to allow a field to lay dormant in order to replenish its nutrients. It also shows awareness that the fertility of the earth is not limitless.

The concept of the Sabbatical Year is also progressive in terms of social justice. While the year likely meant short-term hardship for the farmer, the poor and the stranger benefited from it because they were permitted to eat what grew in the fallow field.

Despite the ecological and social implications of the law, however, the Talmud teaches that the primary motive behind the Sabbatical Year is to reassert God's ownership of the land. As Rabbi Abahu tells us, "The Holy One blessed be He said to the children of Israel: 'Sow for six years and leave the land at rest for the seventh year, so that you may know that the land is mine!'"[32] A fundamental religious principle is thus reaffirmed: The land is God's; therefore the land must be treated respectfully. There are, indeed, rules which one must follow in order to retain stewardship of the land.

The Jubilee Year (the seventh Sabbatical Year) further demonstrates this point. On the Jubilee Year, all land sold in the last 50 years was to revert to its original owners, without compensation. This law stemmed from the biblical

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[32]Sanhedrin 39a.

law: "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is Mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with Me."[33]

The Jubilee Year would likely have benefited small landowners by acting as a disincentive for large tract land acquisition, and this would have had positive ecological and social justice implications. However, Philo reaffirms that the purpose of this law was neither social, nor ecological. He writes: "Do not pay the price of complete ownership, but only for a fixed number of years and a lower limit than fifty. For the sale should represent not real property, but fruits...[because] the whole country is called God's property registered under other masters."[34]

Many scholars believe that the Jubilee Year was a utopian ideal that due to its radical land reassessment policy was never put into practice. Nonetheless, both the Sabbatical and Jubilee Year laws give us further insight into the importance of God's fundamental concept: man is not the ultimate ruler of the world; the Creator is. As the Talmud says in Rosh Hashanah 31a, "God acquired possession of the world and apportioned it to mankind, but He always remains the Master of His world."

Sidrei Bereshit - Orders of Creation:

> Love your fellow as yourself: I am the Lord. You shall observe my laws. You shall not let your cattle mate with a different kind; you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed; you shall not put on cloth from a mixture of two kinds of material.[35]

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[33]Lev. 25:23.

[34]Philo, vol. 27, Loeb Classical Library, as quoted in Marc Swetlitz, *Judaism and Ecology*, p. 26.

[35]Lev. 19:18-19.

These laws are often referred to as *shimiot*, laws one must observe without understanding the full meaning of them. But in the context of our discussion, their meaning is quite clear. Each species is endowed with an intrinsic significance and importance in the web of life. God has created the world with a set order, and man should not try to manipulate it. Thus, man is prohibited from violating the integrity of nature by grafting trees or cross breeding livestock. As the Talmud explains: "Ye shall keep my commandments" refers to "Laws which I have legislated in My world."[36] It is God's world, created as God wished, and consequently man must respect the original order of creation.

The sequence of the verses is important. 19:18 speaks of relationships between men, 19:19 between man and other species. Both types of relationships must show respect for autonomy, borne out of respect for *sidrei bereshit*, the order of God's creation. As the Talmud teaches, "Of all that the Holy One blessed be He created in His world, He created nothing in vain."[37] Man should not disrupt the order of creation.

Bal Tashhit:

> When you war against a city and you have to besiege it a long time in order to capture it; you must not destroy its trees, wielding ax against them. Are trees of the field human to withdraw before you into the besieged city? Only trees that you know do not yield food may be destroyed; you may cut them down for constructing siege works. [38]

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[36]Kiddushin 39a.

[37]Shabbat 77b.

[38]Deut. 20:19-20.

Perhaps the verse most often quoted to counter the idea that Judaism advocates free exploitation of the earth is Deuteronomy 20:19-20. The biblical injunction *Bal Tashhit* (you must not destroy) provides a balance to the command "*v'kivshuha* " (to subdue). By looking at these verses in parallel, we can infer that the original intention of the text is careful stewardship. We are not supposed to have a purely hands-off ethic toward the environment, which can lead to deifying nature, but neither are we to exploit it.

To understand how the prohibition against using fruit trees for siege works can counter God's command to Adam to "subdue the earth and have dominion over it," we will examine how the rabbis have used the verse and expanded its meaning over the years.

The original law -- an injunction against the destruction of fruit trees during war -- may have been a simple polemic against a common technique of warfare. Destruction of the countryside was, and is, a frequently used method of destruction in warfare. One can see that little has changed over the centuries. For example, Avimelech "beat down the city [of Shekhem], and sowed it with salt" and the United States deforested the Vietnamese countryside during the Vietnam War.[39]

The rabbis took the specific law against destroying fruit trees with an ax during wartime and expanded it in three ways to arrive at a general principle, "thou shalt not destroy". We will look at each extension separately.

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[39]Judg. 9:45.

The first extension was from forbidding killing a tree with an ax to forbidding any unnecessary ecological destruction during wartime. For example, during war one may not change the course of a stream with the intent of causing a tree to die from lack of water.[40] Eric Freudenstein addressed this by pointing out that despite the injunction against destroying the trees "By swinging an ax against them," which would seem to prohibit only the use of iron tools, the command that "Thou shalt not destroy its trees" actually includes all methods of destruction.[41]

Some rabbis went on to infer that one may not destroy water sources either, during a war, if it will affect the drinking supply of man, animals or plants. Thus, the rabbis chastised King Hezekiah, who stops up Jerusalem's wells when he is under attack saying: "Why should the kings of Ashur come and find much water?"[42]

Animals specifically come under the protection of *Bal Tashhit* when the law is expanded to prohibit wanton killing of livestock or feeding them polluted or harmful food or water.[43]

The rabbis not only extended the law to include any wanton destruction during wartime, but extended it to peacetime as well. The rabbis argued that if one must refrain from destruction during the difficult time of war, one must

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[40]Sifrei Shofetim sec. 203.

[41]Eric Freudenstein, "Ecology and the Jewish Tradition," p. 30.

[42]2 Chron. 32:4; Berahot Pesahim 56a. See also Bavli Peshahim 56: "The Rabbis taught: King Hezekiah stopped the upper spring of Gihon and the sages did not approve of this action."

[43]B. Hullin 7b; Tosafot B. Baba Kamma 115 b based on Avodah Zarah 30b; Freudenstein, p. 51.

certainly refrain from it during peace, when it is easier to obey the law. Thus we see in Baba Batra 2:8-9 and Baba Kamma 82b that activities that pollute the air are carefully regulated. The placement of threshing floors, tanneries, furnaces and cemeteries, all of which produce foul odors, is carefully monitored. For example, "The tannery is located at least 50 cubits from the city limit. A tannery can only be operated on the east side [down wind] of the city."[44]

The third extension is beyond nature to things created by man. We read: "Whoever breaks vessels or tears garments or destroys a building, or clogs up a fountain, or does away with food in destructive manner violates the principle of *Bal Tashhit*."[45] The rabbis concluded that the wanton destruction of any part of God's creation, even things produced by man, was an affront to God. Man's ability to create, after all, was an extension of God's creation.

Now that we have followed the expansion of the biblical law prohibiting the cutting down of a fruit tree during wartime with an ax to the destruction of any thing at any time, we will look into the intent of the law.

Why a prohibition against felling of fruit trees specifically and destruction in general? We first noted that it was not because of a belief that the tree is endowed with any sort of holiness. This can be deduced because a) the rule is extended to include all wanton destruction and b) there are many times when it is permitted to fell a fruit tree.

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[44] Mishna Baba Batra 2:9.

[45] Kiddushin 32a.

Next we ask, is the prohibition based on economy or scarcity? The law that forbids using olive wood for sacrifice, for example, protects a wood, which was an important part of the Israeli economy.[46] We thus learn that *Bal Tashhit* is based somewhat on economy; that is, one may cut down a fruit tree if its lumber is worth more than its fruit, and a tree may also be cut down if its firewood is needed for heat in the case of illness. However, the primary objective of *Bal Tashhit* still appears to be proper use and respect for God's creation.

The law of *Bal Tashhit* is addressed to the Israelites as a group and not to individuals. Conservation is the responsibility of the community. Ecological concerns override the rights of the private property holder. For example, if one has a tree on his own property, he may not cut it down for landscaping purposes. However, if the tree is causing damage to someone else's property, he must cut it down. Private property is not at issue. Ultimately, all property is God's, which is the overriding ethical principle behind the law of Bal Tashhit.

In the following case, the Talmud discusses a situation that establishes the precedence of ecology over private property rights. Olive trees belonging to farmer #1 have been washed downstream and rooted themselves in the field of farmer #2. Farmer #1 wants to dig out the trees and replant them in his field. The Talmud says he is not allowed to take the olive trees back, as Rabbi Yohanan explains, "Because of the economy of the land of Israel."

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[46]Mishna Tamid 2:3 Talmud Editions 29 a, b; Freudenstein, p. 31.

Olive trees were a vital part of the economy of the land. Although it is in the interest of farmer #1 to have his olive trees back, it is in the interest of Israel that the trees continue to grow in the field of #2, where they are doing well. Farmer #1 should receive some compensation for his trees, which he can use to plant more trees, thus increasing the total number of trees in Israel. In this way, the prohibition against cutting down trees was applied even in a case of private property. [47]

Bal Tashhit allows us to use our natural resources, but to use them conscientiously. We must consider not only the market value and the commercial implications of our choices but the effects of our use on our environment and our neighbors as well.

Some environmentalists have applied this law to situations that the rabbis of old may not have even imagined. Rabbi Samuel Dresner and Rabbi Byron Sherwin write:

> In specific terms it [*Bal Tashhit*] means, for example, that natural resources such as air and water should not be polluted, that animals should not be hunted for sport. This might mean that the purchase of non-recyclable materials, of leather made from the skin of endangered species, that goods produced by companies known to be irresponsible on environmental matters and voting for legislators who oppose conservation bills might come under the jurisdiction of *Bal Tashhit*. [48]

When we assess the boundaries of *Bal Tashhit*, then, we must ultimately decide if we are truly practicing stewardship of God's creation, which is the intent of the law. Samson Raphael Hirsch offers these thoughts:

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[47]Bava Metzia 101a.

> "Do not destroy anything!" is the first and most general call of God, which comes to you, humanity, when you realize yourself as master of the earth....God's call proclaims to you...."If you destroy, if you ruin -- at that moment you are not human, you are an animal, and you have no right to the things around you. I lent them to you for wise use only; never forget that I lent them to you. As soon as you use them unwisely, be it the greatest or the smallest, you commit treachery against My world, you commit murder and robbery against My property, you sin against Me!" This is what God calls unto you, and with this call does God represent the greatest and the smallest against you and grants the smallest, as also the greatest, a right against your presumptuousness. [49]

Yishuv Ha-Aretz:

Some of the ordinances that stem from *Bal Tashhit* are associated with another ecological regulation, *Yishuv Ha-Aretz,* the "settling of the land." *Yishuv Ha-Aretz* is a rabbinic ordinance which also teaches that man must consider the consequences of his actions on the environment. As Jonathan Helfand, explains, "the operative principle in...*Yishuv Ha-Aretz* calls upon the Jew in his homeland to balance the economic, environmental, and even religious needs of society carefully, to assure the proper development and settling of the land."[50]

There appears to be no immutable order of priorities among these considerations. Rather in each situation various needs must be weighed, as to what will best further the settlement of the land of Israel. We see dynamic tensions between these ordinances and the community's needs that are similar to the dynamic tensions we experience in today's world. As an

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[48] Samuel Dresner and Byron L. Sherwin, *Judaism the Way of Sanctification,* p.136.

[49] Fink, *Judaism and Ecology,* p. 39.

example, the Tur discusses who has priority use over a plot of land -- a farmer or a builder. The Tur grants the builder priority, since building a house advances *Yishuv Ha-Aretz* more so than sowing of seed. However, if the farmer wishes to plant trees, this takes precedence over the building of a house.[51]

In a Mishnaic example, we learn that "One may not raise goats or sheep in the land of Israel" because although raising goats and sheep might be profitable to an individual, grazing would be destructive to the land.[52] Similarly we read "all trees are suited for piling on the altar except for the vine and olive tree." These crops were vital for the economy of the Israel, and consequently the rabbis wished to protect them from over use.[53]

Sometimes these rulings seem to reflect the most environmentally sound choice, but other times they do not. But certainly, *Yishuv Ha-Aretz* always was, and is, not anthropocentric and demands that we take into consideration needs other than our own when making land use decisions. As the rabbis taught us to do, we must balance our financial, ecological and religious needs, and when necessary assert the needs of the community and land over those of the individual.

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[50]Jonathan Helfand "The Earth is the Lord's," p. 20.

[51]Tur Hoshen Mishpat par. 175 based in Bava Metzi'ah folio 108b; Helfand, p. 20.

[52]Bab. Talmud Baba Kama 79b.

[53]Tamid 29b Mishneh Torah 7:3.

Tsa'ar Ba'alei Hayyim:

The concept of *Tsa'ar Ba'alei Hayyim* prohibits causing pain or sorrow to living things. Like *Bal Tashhit*, this also had its roots in the Bible and was then expanded by the Rabbis. The Toraitic commandments teach us to be sensitive to the pain of animals, and to foster the attribute of mercy within ourselves. Thus if one finds a bird's nest, it is forbidden to take the young or the eggs while the mother watches.[53] Likewise, one must not slaughter a cow or a ewe together with its offspring, so the mother does not have to witness the death of its young. [54]

Tsa'ar Ba'alei Hayyim is based on these and other biblical verses, all of which teach us to be compassionate to sentient living beings. For example, Deut. 25:4 prohibits a farmer from muzzling an ox from it is threshing grain, lest the ox become frustrated from attempting to eat the grain because it is hungry. Likewise, Deut. 22:10, prevents harnessing an ox and donkey to the same yoke, lest the weaker donkey be strained while trying to keep up with the stronger ox. These prohibitions are concrete manifestations of the theoretical principle from Proverbs: "A righteous man knows the needs of his animals."[55]

Even the Ten Commandments protect the rights of animals: "Six days you shall do your work, but in the seventh day you shall cease from your labor, in order that your ox and your ass may rest, and that your bondsman

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[53]Deut. 22:6-7.

[54]Lev. 22:28.

[55]Prov. 12:10.

and the stranger may be refreshed."[56] And: "The seventh day is a Sabbath of the Lord your God; you shall not do any work -- you, your son or your daughter, your male or your female slave, your ox or your ass, or any of your cattle."[57]

The Rabbis expanded on these laws, thus affirming their commitment to protect sentient beings. Berachot 40a teaches that a man must feed his animals before he eats, lest having satisfied his own hunger, he forgets to care for his animals. A man is allowed to raise animals for slaughter; however, the laws of *shehitah* (kosher slaughter) were designed to maximize respect for the taking of life and minimize the pain experienced by the animals. Hunting is strongly condemned, because the hunter cannot kill the animal in the prescribed manner. And the Talmud even goes so far as to permit the violation of Sabbath prohibitions to save or give comfort to an injured animal, or to feed them, even though one must work to do so.[58]

Tsa'ar Ba'alei Hayyim, like *Bal Tashhit*, clarifies the command *v'kivshuha*. The text does not give man the mandate for unrestrained use of the world's natural resources; our relationship with nature is to protect it. This is why the *Tanach* and the rabbis have given us this plethora of laws to develop our compassion and awareness of how our actions affect the animals in our care.

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[56]Exod.23:12.
[57]Deut. 5:14.
[58]Sabbath 128b.

The Tanach's vision of the messianic age further elucidates God's intent concerning *Tsa'ar Ba'alei Hayyim* and our relationship with animals in general. The *Tanach* preaches that when the messianic age arrives and the perfection of the earth is achieved, man and beast will live together in peace. Although we are not presently capable of a completely non-adversarial relationship with animals, a familiarity with (or a knowledge of) the laws of *Tsa'ar Ba'alei Hayyim* will help us prepare for the messianic age. *Tsa'ar Ba'alei Hayyim* is a taste of the future, which we see described in Hosea, Isaiah and Job:

> In that day, I will make a covenant for them with the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; I will also break bow, sword, and war from the land. Thus I will let them lie down in safety.[59]

> The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard lie down with the kid; the calf, the beast of prey, and the fatling together, with a little boy to herd them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion, like the ox, shall eat straw. A babe shall play over a viper's hole, and an infant pass his hand over an adder's den. And in all of my sacred mount nothing evil or vile shall be done; for the land shall be filled with devotion to the Lord as water covers the sea.[60]

> You will laugh at violence and starvation, and have no fear of wild beasts. For you will have a pact with the rocks in the field, and the beasts of the field will be your allies. [61]

Regard for the Inanimate:

Jewish ecological laws are frequently intertwined with ethical standards of behavior. We have learned that one must treat animals with kindness and

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[59]Hos. 2:20.

[60]Isa.11:1-9.

they too must rest on the Sabbath, so we can acknowledge that property is not ours, but rather all property is the Lord's. As we have seen, many of these specific laws teach us more general lessons. In Judaism, we learn to be compassionate for all elements of God's creation, and this in turn helps us to treat our fellow man with compassion.

The laws concerning the treatment of inanimate objects are particularly fascinating in this light. For example, Exodus 20:23 reads: "Do not ascend My altar by steps, that your nakedness may not be exposed upon it." Commenting on this verse Rashi explains:

> On account of these steps you will have to take large paces and spread the legs...and you would be treating them (the stones of the altar) in a manner that implies disrespect. Now the following statement follows a fortiori: How is it in the case of stones which have no sense (feeling) to be particular about any disrespect shown to them? Scripture ordains that since they serve some useful purpose you should not treat them in a manner which implies disrespect! Then in the case of your fellow-man who is made in the image of your Creator and is particular about any disrespect shown to him, how much more certain is it that you should not treat him disrespectfully![62]

According to another tradition, a folk custom that many of us still follow, the challah is left covered during the Sabbath kiddush lest the challah be upset that the wine is blessed first.

Why these odd lessons about regard for inanimate objects? There is the ethical lesson that Rashi teaches us: if we are compassionate to the least sensitive, we will be compassionate to the most sensitive. There is also the

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[61]Job 5:22-23.

[62]A. M. Silberman, *Chumash with Rashi*, p. 107.

ecological lesson: that all things small and great are part of God's creation. Even things created by man are a manifestation of God's creation once removed. Thus all aspects of the environment, including, animals, plants, mountains and streams, must be treated conscientiously. The type of people we will be, and the quality of environment in which we live, are inextricably linked.

Brachot:

God gives man dominion over the earth in Genesis 1:26, puts conditions on his dominion in Genesis 2:15, and reasserts God's own proprietorship over creation in Leviticus 25:3, saying, "the land is mine." The *brachot*, the blessings, man is commanded to say before partaking of the fruits of creation or observing natural phenomena represent the combination of these three verses, and point to the importance of the triumvirate relationship of God, man and nature. God provides creation. Man tends creation so that its bounty is even greater than it would be without his toil. Nature produces fruit, seed, rain and sun.

Thus at the moment when man is about to partake of the comestibles of the earth, he could thank the land for its fertility and bounty. He could thank man for his wonders of strength and mind. But Jewish law commands that he thank God, the Creator. Man, from his position of creative power, is ordered to pause and acknowledge God's ultimate ownership of the earth. As written in the Talmud:

> Man is forbidden to enjoy anything without pronouncing a benediction, and whoever enjoys anything in this world without a benediction commits a trespass against sacred things [and]...is as guilty as if he would have derived enjoyment from the things dedicated to Heaven, for it is written "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof."[63]

To these talmudic rabbis, there was a tension between the idea that God had given man the land to work, and that the land is God's. As the passage continues, they present the *brachot* as a way to reconciliation:

> Rabbi Levi raised the question: In one place it is written, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof," and in another place it is written, "The heavens are the heavens of the Lord but the earth He has given to the children of man" (Psalm 115:16). The answer is that the former verse applies to the status prior to man's pronouncing the benediction; the latter verse applies after one pronounces the benediction.[64]

The importance of man's obligation to acknowledge God's propriety of the earth is further expressed in Midrash Tanhuma. The Rabbis are discussing the phrase *"yumat ha-met"* (kill the dead man).[65] They ask how is it possible to kill a person who is already dead? They answer:

> An evil person is considered dead, for he sees the sun shining and doesn't bless "the creator of light" (from the morning prayer); he sees the sun setting and he does not bless "Him who brings on evening" (from the evening prayer); he eats and drinks and offers no blessings.[66]

We learn from the *brachot* that even as we are aware that it is the rain of clouds, the softness of sun, and the patient hold of soil which turns seed to

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[63]Berahot 35a,b on Ps. 24:1.

[64]Berahot 35a,b.

[65]Deut.17:6.

fruit, even as we acknowledge that it is from the sweat of man's brow that grain turns to bread, our thanks are offered to the power behind it all. The *brachot* are an offering of thanks to God, who has given us the mandate to care for His creation.

Migrash:

> Ye shall give unto the Levites an open space (*migrash*) for the cities round about them. And they shall have cities to dwell in and the open space shall be for their animals, their substance and all their needs of life.[67]

Most of the texts which we have looked at seem primarily concerned with God's dominion of the world. The law of *Migrash* (open space), however, seems to value nature for the more esoteric reasons of amenity and spiritual development. Rashi explains that the *Migrash* is "an area consisting of an open space round about the city outside it, serving to beautify the city. It was not permitted to build houses there nor to plant vineyards nor to sow a plantation."[68] The *Migrash* was neither for agriculture nor for livestock: rather, it was to beautify the city. Rashi then answers the question left by the text: "What are the needs of life?" He answers: "*l'chol chiyitem* means for all their needs the needs of their life; it does not mean for their animals."[69]

Maimonides applied this rule to all cities, and separated grazing land and open space, apportioning 500 meters for open space and an additional 500

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[66]Tanhuma Beraha Sec. 7.

[67]Num. 35:2-3.

[68]Silbermann, p. 166.

meters for grazing animals. [70] His son, Rav Abraham ben ha-Rambam, explains the importance of open space. He writes, "The enjoyment of the beauties of nature, such as the contemplation of flower-clad meadows, lofty mountains and majestically flowing rivers, is essential to the spiritual development of even the highest categories of human being."[71] The Talmud also rules: "It is forbidden to live in a city that does not have greenery."[72]

Job:

The Book of Job provides the strongest response to the argument that man, as pinnacle of creation, is the lord of the earth. God's "Speech from the Whirlwind" teaches Job that the world is not anthropocentric, but theocentric. God confronts Job by displaying creation before him in all its beauty, mystery and complexity. Clearly, only God can understand and judge the ways of the world; man is too minute to comprehend the vast workings of God's creation.

God iterates that He did not create the world for man's purposes alone. For example, God makes it "rain down on uninhabited lands, on the wilderness where no man is, to saturate the desolate wastelands."[73] In short, nature has intrinsic value, without a relationship to man. God also reminds Job that He has created animals such as the wild ox, the hawk, and the ostrich

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[69] Ibid.

[70] Maimonides Commentary on Num. 35:2-5.

[71] As paraphrased by Arey Carmell in "Judaism and the Quality of the Environment," p. 35.

[72] Jer. Talmud Kiddushin 12:12.

that will not serve man, and the behemoth and the leviathan, which are dangerous to man.

In so doing, the Book of Job reminds us that the world is God's. Humanity must take its place within not above the web of life, and thus has no right to misuse or exploit the earth.

Conclusion:

It is clear that Judaism de-sacralized nature, but it is incorrect to conclude that Judaism advocates reckless exploitation of earth. Rabbinic interpretations of Jewish law demonstrate that Judaism has a strong and long written tradition of careful use of the environment. Considering when it was written, it is understandable that from the point of view of rabbinic Jewish text, the purpose for preservation and conservation is not ecological. But the intent behind the environmental laws -- the earth is the Lord's and therefore must be treated with care and respect -- may be more compelling than ecology. The message is clear: in the words of the Psalmist: "How many are the things You have made, O Lord; You have made them all with wisdom; the earth is full of Your creations....May the glory of the Lord endure forever."[74]

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[73]Job 38:26.

[74]Ps. 104:24, 31.

Chapter Four
Modern Theological Attitudes about Nature: Heschel and Buber

Part One: Abraham Joshua Heschel[1]

Abraham Joshua Heschel may not have intended to create a theological construct that utilizes religious experiences in nature as a way to allow the Creator into our lives. Nonetheless, that is what he does. With his poetic language that urges the reader to pray authentically, and his tenacious confidence that a caring God does exist, Heschel builds a case for the use of wilderness as a medium for Jewish transformative experiences.

Heschel's theology calls for us to redefine our relationship with nature. According to Heschel's writings, we have misconstrued the role God has assigned to us in creation:

> Our age is one in which usefulness is thought to be the chief merit of nature; in which the attainment of power, the utilization of its resources is taken to be the chief purpose of man in God's creation. Man has indeed become primarily a tool-making animal, and the world is now a gigantic toolbox for the satisfaction of his needs. [2]

Heschel does not deny that nature has utilitarian functions. However, treating nature primarily as "a gigantic tool box" implies that nature was created for our use and exists to serve us. The alternative view is of a world in which God is the center and nature is viewed as God's creation. This has radical repercussions for how we treat nature. He writes, "In a universe

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[1]This chapter was greatly influenced by Edward K. Kaplan, "Reverence and Responsibility: Abraham Joshua Heschel on Nature and the Self."

[2]A.J. Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, p. 34.

where we endeavor to see the sacred in everything, we are unlikely to practice utilitarianism. In a God-centered universe, all life becomes a source of wonder."[3]

Heschel's call for us to awaken to the spiritual connection between humanity and the earth comes neither from a sense of ecology, halakhah, nor ethics. Heschel's reverence for the biotic community comes from an awareness that every member of our earthly community, rock, tree and man, is endowed with the quality of the sacred and that without this sense of sacredness the world is devoid of something crucial:

> Horrified by the discovery of man's power to bring about the annihilation of organic life on this planet, we are today beginning to comprehend that the sense of the sacred is as vital to us as the light of the sun; that the enjoyment of beauty, possessions and safety in civilized society depends upon man's sense for the sacredness of life, upon his reverence for this part of life in the darkness of selfishness; that once we permit this spark to be quenched, the darkness falls upon us like thunder.[4]

As we have discussed in Chapter One, Judaism abounds with biblical and rabbinic ordinances concerning the environment. Halakhah contains a plethora of mandates as to how Jews must treat and think about nature. Yet Heschel does not utilize these well-established Jewish norms in his arguments. Rather he appeals to our inner spiritual dimension.

Heschel uses words like "awe," "involvement," "radical amazement" and "depth theology." The path to God's presence requires us to rediscover

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[3]Marc Swetlitz, "Living as If God Mattered: Heschel's View of Nature and Humanity," in *Ecology and Spirit*, p. 244.

[4]Heschel, *Man is Not Alone*, p. 146.

"awe" and "wonder," which enables us intuitively to know our Maker. Heschel never leaves halakhah or liturgy behind. He calls for us to integrate intuition with these more structured modalities: "Only those will apprehend religion who can probe its depth, who can combine intuition and love with the rigor of method."[5]

What does Heschel mean by awe? Awe is that ineffable emotion we experience when we step outside of the realm of humanity and realize the mystery of the universe. Awe is the inexpressible feeling we have when witnessing the birth of a child, a thunderstorm rolling over the plains or an osprey soaring above a jagged cliff. Awe is the realization that we exist.

The awareness of awe necessitates a change in one's perspective of religion, from self-centered to God-centered.[6] The title of Heschel's book God in Search of Man is indicative of the revolutionary reversal that Heschel instigated in the relationship between humanity and God. Heschel urges us away from an anthropocentric view of ourselves in the world by reminding us that God is the center, and saying that God is actually searching for us. This reversal from an anthropocentric view to a "God-centric" view enables us to experience the awe about which Heschel speaks.

Prayer: a Path to Awe

Prayer enables us to experience awe by altering our perspective on life. We realize we are not the center, God is.

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[5]*God in Search of Man*, p. 8.

> We do not step out of the world when we pray; we merely see the world in a different setting. The self is not the hub, but the spoke of the revolving wheel. In prayer we shift the center of living from self-consciousness to self-surrender. God is the center toward which all forces tend.[7]

Prayer reminds us to recognize allusions to the Holy in even the most mundane aspects of life. Jewish text commands us to recite blessings in order to remind ourselves of God's presence. Prayer is a path back to God because in order to pray, we must pause with wonder as we go through our days.

> We are trained in our sense of wonder by uttering a prayer before the enjoyment of food....on seeing a rainbow, or the ocean; on noticing trees when they blossom...we are taught to invoke His great name and our awareness of Him.[8]

Prayer is what connects us to that which is spiritually superior to ourselves and with the larger world around us. Prayer is imperative because, Heschel says, "As a tree torn from the soil, as a river separated from its source, the human soul wanes when detached from what is greater than itself."[9]

Heschel explains that as we move toward a theocentric consciousness of the world, we become aware of the unity of all things under God. From this perspective we accept the moral imperative of our role as God's assistants, assigned to perfect and protect this world about which God cares. The unity and the sanctity of all beings are gifts of God, and thus all creation is deserving of respect and protection.

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[6]For some of us that is.

[7] Heschel, *Man's Quest for God*, p. 7.

[8]*God in Search*, p. 39.

[9]*Man's Quest*, p. 6.

Beyond Words: Another Path to Awe

For those Jews who have not yet found their voice in prayer, wilderness experiences can bring this sense of awe. In cities, surrounded by central air conditioning, medical technology, and sewage systems, it is easy to believe humanity has mastered the world. But when in the wilderness, all illusions of the grandeur of man give way to the realization that a human's power is so very limited. As Heschel writes:

> It is only when we suddenly come up against things obviously beyond the scope of human domination...such as mountains or oceans...that we are somewhat shaken out of our illusions....Confined in our own study rooms, we may entertain any idea that comes to our mind...yet, no one can sneer at the stars, mock the dawn, ridicule the outburst of the spring...Standing between heaven and earth we are silenced.[10]

Nature evokes awe. Beyond that which is broken down into genus, species, ecosystems and technical analysis, beyond the rational and categorical division, nature reminds of the mystery of the world. As Heschel writes: "What we cannot comprehend by analysis, we become aware of in awe."[11] Never for a moment mitigating the importance of prayer as a pathway to the divine, Heschel urges us to a place beyond words:

> Souls that are focused and do not falter at first sight, falling back on words and ready-made notions with which the memory is replete, can behold the mountains as if they were gestures of exaltation. To them all sight is suddenness, and eyes which do not discern the flash in the darkness of a thing perceive but a series of clichés.[12]

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[10]*Man is Not Alone*, p. 290; *God in Search, pp.* 105-106.

[11]Heschel, *Who is Man?*, p. 89.

The sense of radical amazement we experience when truly encountering the awesomeness of God's creation is beyond words, yet is imperative for our awareness of the world and God. Heschel says: "Wonder or radical amazement, the state of maladjustment to words and notions, is, therefore, a prerequisite for an authentic awareness of that which is."[13] The awe beyond words is what creates the kavanah behind our prayers as well as the craving that drives us to seek out the Creator. As Heschel writes: "God begins where words end."[14]

The natural world, then, creates an opportunity for us to move closer to our Maker. The intricacies of the natural world allow us to experience a state of wonder, which Heschel sees as imperative if we are to travel on the path to God. "Awe is more than an emotion; it is a way of understanding, insight into a meaning greater than ourselves. The beginning of awe is wonder, and the beginning of wisdom is awe."[15] As the status of nature rises in light of our spiritual development, Heschel suggests a different construct for viewing our relationship with nature. Since people and nature are both of divine origin, we are equals before God, both objects of God's concern. It is our utilitarian attitude that keeps us from seeing the communion that exists between man and nature before God.

> Where man meets the world, not with the tools he has made but with the soul with which he was born; not like a hunter who seeks his prey but like a lover to reciprocate love; where man

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[12]*Man is Not Alone,* p. 15.
[13]Ibid., p.11.
[14]Ibid., p. 98.
[15]*Who is Man?*, p. 88.

> and matter meet as equals before the mystery, both made, maintained and destined to pass away, it is not an object, a thing that is given to his senses, but a state of fellowship that embraces him and all things.[16]

In short, Heschel tells us that treating the world as either trivial or as a source of objects for our use separates us from the Divine. If we see the wonder in the world around us and allow ourselves to experience the sanctity of God's creation in every sunrise and every stand of virgin forest, we move closer to wholeness and to experiencing the Divine.

Moving from Subject-Object to Unity:

Heschel is careful to explain that he is not advocating pantheism. God is not nature. Rather, nature is created by God and therefore an allusion to God. Just as man, created in God's image, is an allusion to God and a product of God, so too is nature an allusion to and a product of God. Nature is not the object of the subject man. When we cease to divide the world into subject and object we close the gap between our Maker and ourselves. Heschel explains:

> To our knowledge the world and the "I" are two, an object and a subject; but within our wonder the world and the "I" are one in being, in eternity. We become alive to our living in the great fellowship of all beings, we cease to regard things as opportunities to exploit. Conformity to the ego is no longer our exclusive concern and our right to harness reality in the service of so-called practical ends becomes a problem"[17]

In Heschel's worldview, we regard ourselves as equal with nature, as part of a whole which is larger than ourselves. As we find our place in this earth-

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[16]*Man is Not Alone*, p. 38.

wide community, we discover humility, fellowship, and an awareness of the Divine as the center of all.

We move from subject-object to oneness via wonder and awe. Heschel's investigation is never without an analytical dimension, nor should our religious quest be. But Heschel is also aware of the potency of emotion in the experience of awe. Heschel's use of poetic language and imagery reminds us of the voice from the Whirlwind which comforted Job with images of the natural world and with breathtakingly beautiful poetry. The natural images and Heschel's poetic words help move us from viewing the world as object-subject to a place from which we can understand the connection between all beings. The rhythm of nature's cycles and the flow of his poetic sentences enable us to experience the world on an emotional level. Heschel reminds us of the importance of moving beyond the rational and analytical to the emotional.

Ecology in Theology:

In many ways, Heschel sounds like an ecologist. But as ecological as Heschel appears, he does not follow this line of thinking, and does not introduce any ecological or even ethical imperatives. It is not the ecology but what is beyond the ecology that interests Heschel: "We know *how* nature acts

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[17]Ibid., p. 39.

but not *why* and *for whose sake;* we know that we live but not why and wherefore."[18]

Heschel focuses on the importance of the not knowing, of the ineffable. He reassures us that the questions are important, not the answers. The void of knowledge, although uncomfortable, is imperative. As we enter the state of awe, "things surrounding us emerge from the triteness with which we have endowed them, and their strangeness opens like a void between them and our mind, a void that no words can fill."[19] This void is a crucial stage of awareness. The realization that there is more to the world than our analytical ordering can comprehend allows us to surmise an existence beyond our perception. The awareness of transcendence on a personal level allows us to sense that Divinity exists, and is also beyond our perception. The "mystery of our own presence" makes the mystery of the divine more palatable. "The self is more than we dream of; it stands, as it were, with its back to the mind. Indeed, to the mind even the mind itself is more enigmatic than a star."[20]

Heschel integrates the mystery of the self and man's fellowship with all creation into a connection with the Divine. Once we release ourselves from the deception of believing in our isolated singularity, we realize we are part of a larger whole, or, as Heschel puts it:

> Once we discover that the self in itself is a monstrous deceit, that the self is something transcendent in disguise, we begin to feel the pressure that keeps us down to a mere self. We begin to realize that our normal consciousness is in a state of trance, that

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[18]Ibid., p.44.
[19]Ibid., p. 39.
[20]Ibid., p. 45.

> what is higher in us is usually suspended. We begin to feel like strangers within our normal consciousness, as if our own will were imposed upon us. [21]

The self is no longer an individual entity, but rather something linked with, and united with, all creation, and more importantly, with the Creator. Through the process of awe and amazement, we move beyond the constraints of self and realize that ultimately we are an object of God.

> Upon the level of normal consciousness I find myself wrapped in self-consciousness and claim that my acts and states originate in and belong to myself. But in penetrating and exposing the self, I realize that the self did not originate in itself, that the essence of the self is in its being a non-self, that ultimately man is not a subject but an object.[22]

Heschel suggests that when we move toward a comprehension of unity with that which is beyond the scope of self, we move closer to understanding the oneness of God.

> Divine is a message that discloses unity where we see diversity, that disclose peace when we are involved in discord. God is He who holds our fitful lives together, who reveals to us that what is empirically diverse in color, in interest, in creeds -- races, classes, nations -- is one in His eyes and one in essence.[23]

Despite the differences that exist in the world, there is unity because we are all from one Creator. All of creation is unified because each element of it is an object of God's concern:

> Over and against the split between man and nature, self and thought, time and timelessness, the pious man is able to sense

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[21]Ibid., p. 47.
[22]Ibid., p. 48.
[23]Ibid., p. 109.

> the interweaving of all, the holding together of what is apart, the love that hovers over acts of kindness, mountains, flowers, which shine in their splendor as if looked at by God.[24]

Heschel has pronounced a most profound ecological and theological tenet: that all things are connected and therefore sacred. To Heschel, "God means: *Togetherness of all beings in holy otherness.*"[25]

A Return to Biblical Views of Nature:

In Heschel's view nature is not in itself sacred, but is pervaded by the glory of God and involved in an active relationship with the Maker. He urges us away from the modern focus on nature's order and power and back to the understanding of nature held by the prophets, who understood that beyond the grandeur of nature is the window to the grandeur of God, that "Nature is not a direct reflection of God but an allusion to Him. Nature is not a part of God but rather a fulfillment of His will."[26]

What is God's will? According to the Bible, one of nature's roles is to praise God. This seems like a strange concept to us; how can inanimate objects in nature "praise" God? But Heschel reminds us that the Bible teaches that although inanimate objects cannot communicate with us, they can communicate with God. "They sing to God...what the ear fails to perceive,

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[24]Ibid., pp. 108-109.
[25]Ibid., p. 109.
[26]*God in Search*, p. 97.

what reason fails to conceive, the Bible makes clear to our souls. It is a higher truth, to be grasped by the spirit."[27]

Creation exists in part to praise its Creator: "Wherever there is life, there is silent worship."[28] Heschel concludes from his own study that all earthly beings declare their praise to God, "Stars and clouds, wind and rain, springs and rivers, trees and vegetables, beasts and birds -- every creature has its own song."[29]

Man and creation are united before their Creator in praise, not as subject and object or master and servant, but as siblings before a parent. They stand apart from their Creator yet are infused by Divinity in a beautiful balance of transcendence and immanence.

Our relationship with nature has implications for the way in which we treat it. "The earth is our sister, not our mother."[30] Unlike Native American or pagan religions which must treat the earth well because it is itself sanctified, we as Jews must treat the earth well because by tending the earth, we are being respectful of our Creator.

Implications:

Heschel moves us from the theological to the practical, from conceptual to active. The unity of all creates an ethical imperative for environmental action:

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[27]Ibid.
[28]*Man's Quest*, p. 82.
[29]*God in Search*, pp. 96-97.

> When God becomes our form of thinking we begin to sense all men in one man, the whole world in a grain of sand, eternity in a moment. To worldly ethics one human being is less than two human beings, to the religious mind if a man has caused a single soul to perish, it is as though he had caused a whole world to perish, and if he has saved a single soul, it is as though he has saved a whole world (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4,5.)[31]

Every river that is dammed, every forest that is clear-cut, every animal that is hunted to extinction, destroys something that is dear to our God. For Jews, environmental issues are theological, not just ecological.

Once we grasp the significant role of nature in a theocentric world in which God cares for all of God's creatures, we realize we must treat the world with care. Our relationship with nature must reflect our knowledge that we are objects of God's care and nature is also an object of God's care, and that nature communes with God in its own way.

Heschel does not suggest that we desist from developing the earth's natural resources nor cease our technological advancement. Rather he suggests that we heighten our awareness that God is the ultimate creator and owner of the earth and thereby temper our use of the environment. As we increase our awareness of God, we deepen our respect for the earth.

Heschel also reminds us that the Sabbath is a day of freedom from our enslavement to technological progress. This one day a week does not threaten the six other days nor strive to replace them, rather it balances them. On the Sabbath, as we relinquish our illusory control of creation and acknowledge

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[30]*Man is Not Alone*, p. 115.

[31]Ibid., p. 109.

the work of the ultimate Creator, we are awed. On the Sabbath we remind ourselves of the magnitude of God's domain, which we can neither control nor understand. As Heschel explains:

> [The Sabbath] is a day on which we are called upon to share in what is eternal in time, to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation, from the world of creation to the creation of the world. [32]

The Sabbath is a celebration of holy time. It reminds us that ultimately material things are unimportant. Our urge for constant material and technological progress mitigates as we turn toward the spiritual nourishment of the day. Heschel writes: "Six days a week we wrestle with the world, wringing profit from the earth; on the Sabbath we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in the soul."[33] The utilitarian value of all things becomes less important, as awareness of the spiritual grows. Thus a tree is no longer just a source of paper and firewood and lumber for buildings; it is a creature of God.

On the Sabbath we cease being creators attempting to mold the earth and its inhabitants into forms of our own liking. Instead we reaffirm God's sovereignty over all creation, and therefore the unity between man and nature, both created by the hand of God:

> The Sabbath, thus, is more than an armistice, more than an interlude; it is a profound conscious harmony of man and the world, a sympathy for all things and a participation in the spirit that unites what is below and what is. All that is divine in the

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[32] Heschel, *The Sabbath,* p. 10.

[33] Ibid., p. 130.

> world is brought into union with God. This is Sabbath, and the true happiness of the universe. [34]

The Sabbath is a day of reflection, wonder and awe, which allows us to glimpse into the future, to a time when nature and man will co-exist in peace. In our day and age we do need to manipulate the land to meet our needs, but when we observe Shabbat, once a week we experience what peace with the earth might be like.

Heschel encourages us to approach the Sabbath with all the marvel and wonder that our ancestors experienced walking through the fields of Tsfat to meet the Sabbath bride. On the Sabbath we are reminded of the mystery of creation that fills the earth, and we experience God's presence in the world:

> The Sabbath is the presence of God in the world, open to the soul of man. It is possible for the soul to respond in affection, to enter into fellowship with the consecrated day. [35]

Just as the Sabbath reminds us of our relationship with God, so too does the Sabbath reinforce our responsibility to the earth. Once again, Heschel reminds us that the earth is in itself not holy, but is precious to its Creator, and therefore must be treated with care: "The quality of holiness is not in the grain of matter. It is a preciousness bestowed upon things by an act of consecration and persisting in relation to God."[36]

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[34] Ibid., pp. 31-32.

[35] Ibid., p. 60.

[36] Ibid., p. 79.

Conclusion:

Heschel asks us to find a balance between reverence and use in our relationship with nature. We are permitted -- commanded even -- to subdue the earth six days a week, to transform it in order to fulfill our needs. "The duty to work for six days is just as much a part of God's covenant with man as the duty to abstain from work on the seventh day."[37] But we must temper our use of the earth with the awareness of God's presence.

We must use the earth without becoming enslaved to, or idolatrous of, our technological advances. Ultimately God's concerns must be our primary focus. The Sabbath is our weekly opportunity to turn from our technological civilization to God. Heschel says, "On the Sabbath we are independent of technical civilization not because we renounce technology, but because we turn our souls away from our mundane human needs and toward God. During the Sabbath, we escape the grip of technical civilization and express our supreme love for God rather than for things."[38]

We can take the lessons we learn on the Sabbath and return to our weekly toil with the awareness of God's presence in the world and of God's concern for all creation. Perhaps someday this awareness will enable us to live more harmoniously with all of God's creation.

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[37] Ibid., p. 28.

[38] Swetlitz, p. 248.

Part Two: Martin Buber

Martin Buber's provocative passage "The Tree" in I and Thou is so frequently cited by the modern Jewish ecologists that we would be remiss if we omitted it from this paper. Nature was not a primary concern of Buber's, but nonetheless, his thoughts concerning relationships as described in his crowning work, I and Thou, can educate us in terms of Judaism and the environment.

Martin Buber taught that relationships play a critical role in both our personal development and in our ability to experience God. He does not restrict relationships to interpersonal ones nor to parties who can communicate through word and gesture. Like Heschel, Buber's "spheres" of relationships include interactions with man, nature and God:

> The spheres in which the world of relation is built are three. First, our life with nature, in which the relation clings to the threshold of speech. Second, our life with men, in which the relation takes on the form of speech. Third, our life with spiritual beings, where the relation, being without speech, yet begets it. [39]

For Buber, our relationships are the way in which we meet the world. They determine not just the character of that particular relationship, but who we are as people. Our interactions enable us to become -- or prevent us from becoming -- fully realized human beings. Through authentic "meetings" we become complete individuals, and then are able to experience the unity of all things, man, creation and God.

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[39]Martin Buber, *I and Thou, p.* 101.

Buber divides interactions into two categories: "I-It" and "I-Thou." In "I-It" relationships we look at the "other" as an object for our use and manipulation. These relationships are seen in the detached interactions necessary for pursuits such as technological research, and are characterized by observations, assessments, taking apart and reassembling.

"I-It" relationships enable us to know and understand our world. They result in vaccinations against diseases and rockets that fly us to the moon. "I-It" relationships are also hazardous, however, because they compel us to believe that we can conquer and control the world. The "I-It" mentality conditions us to believe that everything serves a utilitarian purpose and is an object for our use. It is this mentality that allows us to dump nuclear waste at sea and drill for oil in a caribou calving area. Ironically, when our whole world is recognized only for its functional value, eventually, even the "I" becomes an "it." In Buber's words, a man "sees the beings around him...as machines, capable of various achievements, which must be taken into account and utilized for the cause."[40]

"I-It" relationships prevent us from truly knowing the being with whom we are engaged. We limit our focus to the element that will serve us. A person becomes merely someone who can cut our hair, a tree a source for wood, and God a source of healing.[41] In an "I-It" relationship, we do not meet the totality of man, nature or God.

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[40]Ibid., p. 68.

[41]This is not to say God is NOT a healer, only that God is not ONLY a healer.

There are times in our lives when we consent to be an "It." When we go to a doctor we can accept her objective testing to determine how she can best "fix" this machine that is our body. But there are moments when what we crave is an interaction in which the essence of who we are will be understood. That which we desire is what Buber calls an "I-Thou" relationship.

To Buber an "I-Thou" relationship is an "authentic encounter." These are relationships that require participation on a level beyond that of words or actions. For example, when we can not articulate what we want to say and yet a friend understands anyway, we experience an "I-Thou" encounter. These are the moments in which we reach out to a person in grief, not to offer words but to simply be with them.

"I-Thou" relationships acknowledge and affirm the totality of who we are, the essence of our being and all being, all that is ineffable. As Buber explains, "I-Thou can be spoken only with the whole being....I become through my relation to the Thou; as I become I, I say thou. All real living is meeting."[42]

Because the "I-Thou" relationship transcends words and gestures it may be experienced in nature. It is difficult for us to comprehend how one can have a relationship with a piece of mica or a tree, yet Buber explains that our difficulty is only because of our restricted worldview:

> It is part of our concept of a plant that it cannot react to our action toward it; it cannot "respond." Yet this does not mean that here we are given simply no reciprocity at all. The deed or attitude of an individual being is certainly not found here, but

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[42]Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, p. 11.

> there is reciprocity of the being itself, a reciprocity which is nothing but being in its course....Our habits of thought make it difficult for us to see that here, awakened by our attitude, something lights up and approaches us from the course of being.[43]

Buber felt it was important for people to relate to nature in the manner of "I-Thou" because every "I-Thou" relationship offers the opportunity to experience the connection that exists between all matter: "through contact with every Thou we are stirred with a breath of the *Thou*, that is, of eternal life."[44] Having experienced the relation, we are able to feel the presence of the Deity: "Every particular Thou is a glimpse through to the eternal Thou; by means of every particular Thou the primary word addresses the eternal Thou."[45]

"I-Thou" relationships with nature re-educate us about God. Just as a relationship with a tree must exist without words or gestures, so too we can not know our Maker by hearing God's voice or seeing his actions. We can not hear the tree or God, nor can we fathom the right words to say. Buber tells us to let go of words of prayer and petition, and trust in the Presence: "We speak with Him only when speech dies within us."[46] As Eugene Borowitz explains, "Presence, not verbiage, is given when I and Thou commune."[47]

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[43]Ibid., p. 126.
[44] Ibid., p. 63.
[45]Ibid., p. 74.
[46]Ibid., p. 104.
[47]Eugene Borowitz, *Choices in Modern[Jewish Thought*, p. 153.

Through "I-Thou" interactions we can find God anywhere and everywhere. Borowitz writes: "Buber's argument is simple...God is everywhere....wherever we are, as ordinary as that might be. [We discover God]...by being there and letting whatever happens happen."[48] Buber warns us not to "limit God" to synagogue, prayer, and text. He urges us to open ourselves to the personal involvement with God that is available to us through the "I-Thou" interactions.[49]

> Men do not find God if they stay in the world. They do not find Him if they leave the world. He who goes out with his whole being to meet his Thou and carries to it all being that is in the world, finds Him who cannot be sought.[50]

Following Buber's argument, if our relationships with the natural world, with tree and stone, have the potential in them to allow us to experience God, then we must treat our natural environment with the same respect with which we treat our holy places, holy times, holy books, and holy objects. God does not dwell in any of these any more than God dwells in a tree. But each of them is holy to us because it is a path to our Maker.

Buber does not suggest that we abandon all "I-It" relationships. He understands their importance in our world. But he maintains that we should be limited neither by nor to them. A tree as an object is important to our civilization. Yet by stopping at that level of encounter we deny ourselves an opportunity to know the totality of the tree, to experience the inherent unity

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[48]Ibid., p. 152.
[49]Ibid., 152.
[50]*I and Thou*, p. 79.

and connection of all beings, and to feel the presence of the Eternal. Buber writes:

> It can, however, also come about, if I have both will and grace, that in considering the tree I become bound up in relation to it.[51] The tree is no longer It....it is bodied over and against me and has to do with me, as I with it -- only in a different way.[52]

Buber presents an exciting new way to "consider a tree." He urges us to understand the tree (and all of nature, humanity and God), not merely in light of what function they perform or which of our needs they can fulfill, but in terms of the totality of their being. He invites us to interact with them in a manner that allows us to know their essence in a new way of knowing. During "I-Thou" interactions we move beyond words and gestures to a state in which we experience the connection between all beings and enter into a relationship with God.

Once we "consider a tree" to be a "Thou" we can and must alter the way in which we make environmental choices. When nature is no longer exclusively an "It," an object to be manipulated for our use, we must treat our environment responsibly and respectfully. Using Buber's language, when making environmental decisions we must remember that nature is a source of "authentic encounters" through which we can come to relate to the divinity that dwells in the world.

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[51]Perhaps the most difficult word in this quotation is the apparently innocuous "however." Even after a rich study of Buber and his critics the reader is left wondering how the relationship of tree and human comes about. Because so much of the "I-Thou" relationship is beyond words, even for Buber there remains a great deal that is not clear about the relationship between man and nature. Sometimes we are unable to verbalize the relationship and can only point to it. Writes Wood: "It is not certain whether the [natural] things themselves address man or God addresses him through things or both. It may be that their very being is God's address. " (Robert Wood, *Martin Buber's Ontology*, p. 116.)

[52]*I and Thou*, pp. 7-8.

Conclusion
Jewish Attitudes about Nature: Perspectives from Modernity

In the previous chapters we have explored Jewish attitudes about nature during four periods of Jewish history, pre-biblical, biblical, rabbinic, and modern theological. We have learned why certain perspectives were appropriate during different times in our historical development. Clearly some of these authentically Jewish viewpoints are no longer appropriate in today's world.[1] However, in many instances becoming aware of the role nature can play in our lives as Jews can help us live more fulfilling Jewish lives.

In today's world there are many opportunities to integrate nature into Judaism. There are an increasing number of Jewish wilderness programs or synagogues that provide Jewish outdoor activities. Why are these programs so popular? Nature experiences provide important access points to Judaism that can make halakhah and ritual more meaningful to a new generation of Jews. Additionally, they provide opportunities for personal growth, community development, and strengthened relationships with God.

In the pages that follow we will attempt to integrate the four previous chapters to explain how nature can enrich contemporary Jewish lives in terms of halakhah, community, tradition, and theology.

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[1]Although we do believe there is a continuum between moral behavior and physical consequences, we no longer believe it is as simple as that mistreatment of orphans results in drought.

Part One: Halakhah

> When God created the first human beings, God led them around the Garden of Eden and said: "Look at my works! For your sake I created them all. See to it that you do not spoil and destroy My world; for if you do, there will be no one else to repair it."[2]

God has commanded us to take care of God's earth. When we follow halakhic regulations such as *Tsa'ar Ba'alei Hayyim* and *Bal Tashhit* we do so because ultimately all of creation belongs to God and not to us. When we follow the halakhah by buying goods in bulk to minimize packaging, composting our leftover foods, and eating free-range animals rather than those raised on feed lots, we behave as responsible caretakers of God's earth.

The everyday actions of our lives as governed by halakhah provide opportunities to be ecologically responsible and move us on a path towards God. For example, thanking God before and after we eat and pausing from work on the Sabbath remind us of our roles as stewards of God's creation. Learning not to covet what is our neighbor's helps liberate us from over-consumption and thus breaks the vicious of cycle of production-consumption, which is so detrimental to God's earth.

For Jews, ecology and theology are inseparable. One can not claim to love God and yet not take care of nature. To love God is to care for God's earth, and conversely to take care of the earth is to love God.

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[2]Midrash Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1 on Eccles. 7:13.

Part Two: Community

Judaism is a religion based in community in which the needs of the community outweigh the needs of an individual. Ecological problems occur when this moral order is reversed -- when people consider their own desires first and disregard the impact they have on the community. Ecological problems are moral problems. When we learn to value our community we learn to consider our actions in light of the effect we will have on the community. Conversely, when we learn how our actions affect others and how we are affected by their actions, we learn to value community.

We are all connected in a web of life, continually affecting each other and all of nature. Our community extends beyond humanity to include all of God's creation. United by a common origin, nature and humanity stand as equals before God. And lest humans think they are above nature, "Our Rabbis taught: Adam was created [last of all beings] on the eve of Shabbat. Why?...So that if people's minds become [too] proud, they may be reminded that the gnats preceded them in the order of creation."[3]

Experiences in nature remind us of the unity of all being and the interdependence of all creation. To be responsible members of the Jewish community, we must be considerate of all members of our community, including nature. For Jews, ecology and community are inseparable. One can not claim to cherish community and yet disregard nature.

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[3]Sanhedrin 38a, Seder Nezikin.

Part Three: Tradition

As we learned in Chapter Three, Jews used to live and worship in intimate contact with nature. Today, nature has been relegated to the background of our lives and is not generally valued as an important part of a Jewish experience. Many of us, even those of us who observe *Rosh Hodesh,* are rarely aware of what phase the moon is in. Worshiping outdoors is considered merely a novelty, appropriate for *Sukkot* or summer-camp. Many of our synagogues are built without windows or with large windows where the views are blocked by stained glass. We even have a rabbinic seminary where students study pages of text in classrooms without a single window. How far we have come from learning from the earth, as Job recommended we do! "Ask the beasts, and they will teach you, the birds of the sky, they will tell you. Or speak to the earth, it will teach you, the fish of the sea will tell you stories."[4]

In some ways it seems like the biblical purging of ancient nature cults lingers unconsciously today, long after the threat of paganism has ceased. Yet in other ways, a relationship with nature has endured. Nature has always held a prominent place in *Kabbalah, Hasidism,* and modern Israeli poetry. Rosh Hodesh, linking us to the lunar rhythms, has for centuries been a part of Jewish life and has experienced a recent resurgence in popularity. *Tu B'shvat* has come to resemble a Jewish Earth Day and the *Tu B'shvat* seder has become increasingly popular in recent years.

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[4]Job 12:7-8.

These nature-based Jewish traditions have survived because they were important to our forebears. By making them an important part of our religious practice, we can enrich our Jewish lives as well as connect ourselves with our history. For Jews, outdoor religious experiences and tradition are inseparable. One cannot claim to preserve tradition and yet not integrate nature into our Jewish lives. To preserve tradition is to experience authentic Jewish ties to nature.

Part Four: Theology

Perhaps the most compelling reason to re-integrate nature-based experiences into Judaism and to bring Judaism to the wilderness is because the natural world creates opportunities in which we can experience the Creator. As the Talmudic Rabbis explained concerning the benediction for the moon:

> R. Aha b. Hanina also said in the name of R. Assi in R. Johanan's name: Whoever pronounces the benediction over the new moon in its due time welcomes, as it were, the presence of the Shechinah.[5]

Nature is not God, but serves as a "metaphor and simile" for God.[6] As Traherne so poetically describes it, "the world is that body, which the Deity hath assumed to manifest His beauty and by which He maketh Himself

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[5]Sanhedrin 42a.

[6] Blidstein, "Nature in Psalms," p.32.

visible, as it is possible He should."[7] How then can we not value and take care of the world?

Rediscovering awe and wonder, and relating to the natural world in the manner of "I-Thou," are but a few of the ways in which we can experience the Divine in nature. When we simply awaken our senses to the reality that surrounds us, we become aware of God's presence. As Heschel explains in the following exegesis of Psalm 19:

> *"The whole earth is full of His glory."*[8] The outwardness of the world communicates something of the indwelling greatness of God, which is radiant and conveys itself without words. *"There is no speech, there are no words., neither is their voice heard."* And yet, *"their radiation goes out through all the earth and their words to the end of the world."*[9] The glory is neither an esthetic nor a physical category. It is sensed in grandeur, but it is more than grandeur. It is, as we said, a living presence or the effulgence of a living presence.[10]

For Jews, seeking God and caring for the earth are inseparable. One cannot claim to seek God, yet live apart from nature, and one cannot claim to love God, yet mistreat the earth.

Conclusion:

As we have demonstrated, the Jewish attitude about nature has varied drastically over the centuries. Our people began as nomads, living intimately with nature and learning about God through the natural forces that

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[7]Thomas Traherene, *Centuries*, Second Century, section 20- 21. As quoted in Blidstein, "Nature in Psalms," p.32.

[8]Ps. 19:4-5.

[9]Ibid.

surrounded them. Later, the People of the Book developed the skill of writing and Judaism became a text-based religion. Worship in the high places was replaced by Torah study and the relationship with nature became less central. A dynamic tension grew between the urge for progress and development and the need to be stewards of God's earth.

Today our attitude toward nature has reached another level of maturity. We have a new understanding of the implications of our relationship with nature in terms of halakhah, community, tradition and theology and we know that there are many reasons why Jews must be careful stewards of the earth. We must be careful stewards because God commanded us to take care of God's creation. We must be careful stewards because the earth is an object of God's concern. We must be careful stewards because the natural world is not our toolbox; it is our sibling. But most of all we must be careful stewards because the opportunity to experience the Divine awaits us in the wilderness. As the modern Jewish poet Saul Tchernichovsky describes it:

> Where is He that in joy we may worship Him?
> Here on earth too He lives, not in heaven alone.
> And this earth He has given to man.
>
> A striking fir, a rich furrow, in them you will find His likeness,
> His image incarnate in every high mountain.
> Wherever the feeling of life flows -- in animals, plants,
> In stones -- there you will find Him embodied.
>
> And His household? All being: the gazelle, the turtle,
> The shrub, the cloud pregnant with thunder;
> No God disembodied, mere spirit -- He is God-In-Creation!
> That is His name and that is His fame forever![11]

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[10]Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, p. 83.

[11]Translated by R. Cover, E, Gendler, and A. Porat. In Gendler, p.58.

For centuries, our ancestors met God in the wilderness. Once again, in our time, Jews are returning to the wilderness to invigorate their Jewish worship and ritual, surrounded by the awesome beauty of God's creation. The time has come to return to the "high places," this time with our text in hand. It is time to re-explore the awe Job experienced when witnessing the wild goat giving birth, but this time we will be accompanied by the words of the whirlwind. It is time to return to the sublime by once again watching the sun set over the ocean, but now we will chant the words spoken for centuries by our people: "Creator of day and night, rolling light away from darkness and darkness from light."[12] We are mature enough and secure enough in our monotheism to know that we can meet God in nature, without confusing nature with God. It is time that we reclaim this ancient Jewish heritage as our own.

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[12]Evening Liturgy Ma'ariv Aravim.

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